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ENHANCING PARTICIPATION OF FIRST-YEAR EDUCATION STUDENTS: FOCUSING ON LIFE CIRCUMSTANCES

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Abstract

This paper reports on a participatory action research study that investigated the life circumstance associated with first-year education students who displayed limited participation with their study activities within a regional university. The life circumstance presented in this paper include first in family, age, socio-economic status, living away from home and work commitments. Research data include a business analytics program of the students' records, research literature, and the experiences of the College Student Support Officer (CSSO). The four-phase analysis reflected on the prevalence of the life circumstances with the students who displayed limited participation and who received support from the CSSO. The paper discusses the support strategies employed by the CSSO and others support structures that may be required. The study concluded that the life circumstances associated with most first-year students who displayed limited participation can overlap and compound negatively to affect the students' ability to complete their studies successfully.

Key Words: First-year student support, life circumstances

Introduction

This paper draws from a holistic 'learning to learn' approach for first-year education students who displayed limited participation with their study activities as monitored by the CSSO. In this paper, students who displayed limited participation were identified by: (1) limited engagement with subject materials on LearnJCU (Blackboard Learning Management System), (2) limited engagement with weekly tutorial classes, and (3) failure to submit assessment one. Wingate (2007, p. 394) identifies two components of the 'learning to learn' approach: (1) understanding 'learning' and becoming an independent learner, and (2) understanding 'knowledge' and becoming competent in constructing knowledge. The first component involves the personal development of students and requires individual attention to students' personal life circumstances and goals, and a high degree of reflection by the students. The second component requires less personal attention, but classroom time and lecturers' input. This paper mainly draws from the first component of the holistic 'learning to learn' approach to investigate the life circumstance associated with first-year education students who displayed limited participation with their study activities within a regional university and the need for a comprehensive support framework that may be required for the students.

Baik, Naylor and Arkoudis (2015) surveyed experiences of first year students in Australian universities and report that some indicators of engagement have dropped substantially since 2009. The Great Schools Partnership (2013) suggests that students who display limited participation in their university study activities are likely to have a higher possibility of failing academically or dropping out of their university study. However, in most cases, the circumstances that lead to students' limited participation in their study activities are situational rather than innate. With the exception of certain characteristics such as learning disabilities, the situations that lead to students' limited participation in their study activities, rarely relates to a student's ability to learn or succeed academically. Rather it relates to a student's life circumstances (Great Schools Partnership, 2013).

Wingate (2007) argues that many universities persist with outdated models of supporting student participation and fail to recognise that learning to learn at university means a fundamental change in students' circumstances and belief systems and hence requires a comprehensive support framework. O'Shea (2007) argues that the typical candidate in university is no longer a school leaver originating from predominantly white, middle-class enclaves where the tradition of attending further education is well established. Baik, Naylor and Arkoudis (2015) observe that the student body has continued to diversify with the introduction of the demand driven funding system and the provision of government funding to increase the inclusion and support of people from under-represented groups. The commencing students now entering university come from different economic and social backgrounds. Universities need to cater for these different cohorts of students who are now entering higher education. Kift, Nelson and Clarke (2010) suggest the need for transition programs that should provide the optimal vehicle for dealing with the increasingly diverse commencing student cohorts. The context specific programs can facilitate a sense of support, belonging as well as address the life circumstances of the students. For this paper, we focus on the life circumstances of first-year Bachelor of Education students in a regional university who displayed limited participation with their study activities as monitored by the CSSO.

The study employed a participatory research method to analyse the support structure associated with the first-year education students who displayed limited participation with their university study activities during Study Period 2 in 2016 and Study Period 1 in 2017 at the James Cook University (JCU) Cairns Campus through the lens of the CSSO and a supporting education lecturer. The next section explores student participation in higher education.

Student Participation in Higher Education

For a number of years, successive Australian governments have committed funds to widen participation in higher education and meet international obligations within Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2012). The former and current Australian Federal Governments provide funding to universities to undertake activities and implement strategies that improve access to undergraduate courses, as well as improve retention and completion rates of students (Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP), 2016). Baik, Naylor and Arkoudis (2015) report that while there has been much improvement in the first year experience over the past two decades, for a significant proportion of students, getting motivated to study is difficult and coping with university study remains challenging. This is particularly the case for students who enter university with low OP (or ATAR) scores. There are many programs and strategies offered throughout Australian universities that attempt to help students to enhance their participation in their university studies.

Some universities in Australia have developed programs such as First Year Experience to enhance student participation in their studies. Schrader and Brown (2008, p. 317) reviewed such programs and observe that not all programs are “directed towards skills and knowledge that will enable students to be successful both academically and socially”. Similarly, Barefoot (2000, p. 17) believes programs similar to First Year Experience provide a “unique opportunity to change student attitudes and expectations”, but some of the programs may be “struggling for credibility and survival”. Barefoot (2000, p. 17) believes many students who are offered admission to university degree programs do not possess academic skills required to achieve; therefore universities need to offer “supplemental instruction”. However, one of the “paradoxes of higher education is that students who may need support are those who are less likely to access it” (cited in Lizzio & Wilson 2013, p. 111).

Some First Year Experience programs have focused on remediating these poorly performing students. O'Shea (2007) argues that many students now access university through non-traditional modes of entry and as such, may not readily identify with or adhere to the values and practices found there. Baik, Naylor and Arkoudis (2015) observe that there has been an increase in the proportion of students for whom worrying about money interferes with their study, from 33 per cent in 1994 to 39 per cent in 2014. They argue that this is a cause for concern as financial stress correlates with poor student experience and can lead students to seriously consider deferring or withdrawing from their studies. Additionally, these same students may also approach their university degree underprepared for study (Norton, 2010; Maher & Macallister, 2013; Lizzio & Wilson, 2013; Barefoot, 2000; Nelson, Duncan, & Clarke, 2009). Wingate (2007) warns that some of the programs offered by universities may have limitations and can work on the assumption that students have certain deficiencies. There is need for context specific programs within regional universities that draw from a holistic ‘learning to learn’ approach to address the life circumstance associated with the students.

Nelson, Duncan and Clarke (2009, p. 2) believe student participation and engagement is a joint “responsibility” between students and universities. Lizzio and Wilson (2013, p. 109) describes an “academic recovery process” to help students understand reasons behind poor performance in their assessment, followed by identifying goals and strategies for future improvement. This program might help students who fail or marginally pass their first assessment. However, it can be argued that some of these programs lean towards the deficit models that focus on some skills acquisition rather than taking a holistic ‘learning to learn’ approach (Wingate, 2007). There is a need for regional universities to move away from the deficit programs towards more holistic programs that address the life circumstance associated with their students.

The intent of the JCU First Year Experience and Retention Policy (2014) is to provide orientation and transition to help students adjust to studying and to ensure equity when accessing teachers and student support. However, we argue that this approach if not well structured and implemented, might not address the principle nature of the circumstances of the students who display limited participation with their study activities. Wingate (2007) advocates for a comprehensive framework that uses different contexts for developing student learning in the transition period, stretching from admission to the end of the first term. Such a framework might help to address the challenge because of the life circumstances of the students. Tinto (2009, p. 1) argues that most universities do not take “student retention seriously” and it is just another issue added to their list. Tinto’s position is that adding an orientation course for first-year students can be helpful, but may not change the principle nature of the circumstances of the students. When the nature of the circumstances of the students are not rectified, they are likely to have limited participation with their studies. A more

effective approach needs to take a holistic ‘learning to learn’ approach as advocated by Wingate (2007).

Method

The study employed a participatory action research method to analyse the support structure associated with first-year education students who displayed limited participation with their university study activities during Study Period 2 in 2016 and Study Period 1 in 2017 at the JCU Cairns Campus. The study involved ongoing reflective exchange between the CSSO, participating students and a supporting education lecturer. McNiff and Whitehead (2006, p. 256) suggest that participatory research “is a form of research that enables practitioners to learn how they can improve practice, individually and collectively” and Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) perceive practice as reflexive to be studied dialectically through critically examined action of participants. Ethics approval was sought and received from the institutional ethics committee prior to conducting the study, with key considerations being the anonymity provided to the fifteen students who consented to participate. Only narratives of the fifteen students who consented to participate in the study are included in this paper. Georgakopoulou (2006) encourages the inclusion of small narratives of the participants to urge for systematic research that will establish connections between the interactional features of the participants. The research questions that guided the investigation were:

1. What life circumstances are associated with first-year education students in a regional university who displayed limited participation with their study activities?
2. What are the support strategies that may be required with the first-year education students who displayed limited participation with their study activities?

Research data included research literature, the reflections of the CSSO, narratives of the students who consented to participate, and the COGNOS analytic data of first-year education students who displayed limited participation with their study activities. COGNOS is a business analytics program used by the university to capture all the students’ demographic records and life circumstances at enrolment and their engagement records in their courses. A four-phase analysis was implemented to reflect on the circumstances of the first-year education students who received support from the CSSO during Study Period 2 in 2016 and Study Period 1 in 2017. In Phase 1, we reviewed the monitoring of first-year students participation by the CSSO. In Phase 2, we reviewed on the reflections of the CSSO and the support given to first-year education students who displayed limited participation. In Phase 3, we reflected on narratives of students and reviewed the COGNOS analytic data of first-year education students who displayed limited participation. In Phase 4, we reflected on the possible support strategies that may be required with first-year students who displayed limited participation. The next section describes the monitoring of the first year students’ participation with their study activities.

Monitoring the Participation of First-Year Students

The role of the CSSO at JCU includes monitoring the participation of first-year students with their subject study materials. Monitoring these students enables the CSSO to track on how the students are progressing in the subjects and to identify the possible strategies that need to be implemented to enhance the students’ participation. However, our position is that if the CSSO role is not well thought out and well structured, this can lean towards a deficit model. Wingate (2007) suggests that

supporting learning at university is a complex process and requires measures that go beyond ad hoc initiatives.

The following is a conversation between the CSSO and a student during Study Period 2 in 2015.

Student: Can I book an appointment? I believe I need guidance to get my studies back on track and I am not sure what to do.

CSSO: During the appointment, the CSSO discovered the student had serious health issues and this was adversely affecting her continuation of the semester. I can work with you today to plan your week, so you can fit all your study and life commitments. This plan will help you to have a goal each day and hopefully have success. The CSSO showed the student how to use the weekly plan on the JCU website. The CSSO also referred the student to the AccessAbility team, who could further support her with the health issues.

In week two of a new semester, monitoring begins with students who have not participated adequately with the subject materials on LearnJCU. Email and telephone contacts with the students are made to clarify on why the students are not engaging the subject materials. Following from the students' responses, immediate help or referral to other support staff is initiated so that the students can move quickly back to their studies. Also during week two, monitoring of weekly 50 minutes tutorial classes for each subject begins. Email and telephone contacts are made with students after missing two consecutive tutorial sessions, to try to re-engage the students into the subject. Monitoring and contacting students for not attending classes continues through to week eight when the university schedules their final subject withdrawal date without penalty. If students know they are going to fail a subject because of non-attendance (only when it is a compulsory component to pass), they have the option to withdraw before the end of week eight without receiving a fail mark on their transcript.

Other monitoring strategies continue throughout the semester such as first assessment submission or failure to submit. Students are contacted by email as a courtesy the day after the submission date reminding them to contact their lecturer to explain the reasons for not submitting on time. Wingate (2007) advocates for regular meetings with students to guide them in using the tools used for learning and to help them assess outcomes and argues that the ideal context for this personal development process is the personal tutorial. If the student has failed the first assessment, referrals to the learning advice staff, learning centre resources, or subject coordinators are made to gain an understanding of the skill level the student needs to develop.

Figure 1 below summarises part of the monitoring protocol and the number of first-year education students who displayed limited participation with their subject activities during Study Period 2 in 2016 and Study Period 1 in 2017. Students who displayed limited participation were identified by: (1) limited engagement with subject materials on LearnJCU (Blackboard Learning Management System), (2) limited engagement with weekly tutorial classes, and (3) failure to submit assessment one. Of the eight students who did not achieve success in their studies for Study Period 2 in 2016, two changed their choice of degree; six failed two or more subjects and needed to repeat the subjects during 2017. Of the eight students who did not achieve success in their studies for Study Period 1 in 2017, three applied for leave of absence for the remainder of 2017. The other five students failed two or more subjects.

Bachelor of Education students	Study Period 2, 2016		Study Period 1, 2017	
	Total No. of first-year students monitored for support	317	100%	255
No. of students who displayed limited participation with their study activities, during whole subject period	76	23.97%	57	22.35%
No. of students who accessed support from CSSO during subject period	57	75% (of students who displayed limited participation)	46	80.70% (of students who displayed limited participation)
No. of students who improved their participation in their studies	49	85.96% (of students who accessed support)	38	82.61% (of students who accessed support)
Students unsuccessful in their studies during Study Period	8	14.04% (of students who accessed support)	8	17.39% (of students who accessed support)

Figure 1: Education students who displayed limited participation with their study activities and who received support from the Student Support Officer

Reviewing COGNOS Analytic Data and Students' Narratives

In Figure 1, we presented the number of students who displayed limited participation with their study activities during Study Period 2, 2016 and Study Period 1, 2017 within the regional university. We reviewed the COGNOS analytic data of these first-year education students to identify the life circumstances that were prevalent in the group of students. As highlighted earlier, COGNOS is a business analytics program that captures students' demographic records at enrolment and their engagement records in their courses. In Study Period 2, 2016 we reviewed the COGNOS analytic data of 23.97% or the 76 out of 317 students who displayed limited participation with their study activities. In Study Period 1, 2017 we also reviewed the COGNOS analytic data of 22.35% or the 57 out of 255 students who displayed limited participation with their study activities. We identified five life circumstances that were prevalent in the group of students: first in family (FiF) to attend university, mature age, low socio economic status (SES), living away from home, and work commitments. However, the COGNOS analytic data also shows that these life circumstances were also prevalent in students who were not in the limited participation category. For example, more than 60% of the students were FiF to attend university and more than 40% of the students were mature-age in both study periods.

The life circumstances can be categorised as those that cannot be changed and those that can be improved over time. The life circumstances that cannot be changed are FiF to attend university and mature age (Scevak et al. 2015; Murtaugh, Burns & Schuster 1999). The strategies to address these life circumstances require a fundamental change in the students' belief systems (Wingate, 2007). The categories that can be improved over time are low SES backgrounds, living arrangements and work commitments, and being underprepared to study (Barefoot 2000; Maher & Macallister 2013; Scevak et al. 2015). The strategies to address these life circumstances require support measures that go beyond ad hoc initiatives (Wingate, 2007). The life circumstances: FiF to attend university, mature age, low SES, living away from home and work commitments were also reflected in the narratives of the students. In the next section, we first reflect on the research literature around each of the life circumstances and then the students' narratives to address Georgakopoulou's (2006) call for the

inclusion of small narratives of the participants to establish connections between the interactional features of the research.

First in Family

During semester 2 in 2016, 57 education students accessed support from the CSSO. From the COGNOS analytic data of these education students, 49% were categorised as FiF. Of the 57 students, ten were also categorised mature age (25 years and over), eleven were post-school leavers (20-24 years) and seven had just left school and came straight to university (19 years and under). During semester 1 in 2017, 46 education students accessed support. The semester saw a rise of FiF students to 65.20%. Of these 30 students categorised as FiF, eight were categorised as school leavers, 15 were categorised in the post-school leaver age group and the remaining seven were mature age students.

According to some research studies, being the FiF to attend university can be a disadvantage in terms of knowledge, expectations and preparation (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Scevak, et al., 2015). Scevak et al. (2015, p. 4) investigated the “influence of FiF status to academic outcomes”. This study reveals that FiF students were less confident with using Learning Management Systems, were highly unlikely to ask for help from academic staff and struggled with their study workload, academic skills and the intention to continue their course with confidence. These findings were also prevalent in most FiF students who received support from the CSSO. O’Shea (2007) argues that there is a lot of literature and research pertaining to the first-year student experience but little that acknowledges or explores how this varies between different cohorts of students and addressing their different circumstances. The following is a conversation between the CSSO and a student.

Student: I have no support at home. My parents and sister do not understand what it’s (university) like. I feel all alone and have no one who I could turn to.

CSSO reflection: She looked very sad. I just wanted to give her a hug. We discussed a weekly planner and an assessment planner to keep her on track. We also discussed other resources available on campus and on the JCU website, which could give her support.

CSSO: Have you ever considered counselling?

CSSO reflection: She did not feel she needed it. She left my office happy and grateful for my help and support.

The CSSO felt that she needed to give the FiF to attend university students individual support to address their confidence with technology and communicating with academics. The help also needed to extend to other university support programs offered. Some students in the group needed further well-being support from counsellors on or off campus, some needed time management skills fitting a work/study/life balance during the semester period, while others needed to build confidence. The CSSO felt that affording FiF students to gain academic skills and confidence to ask for help not only benefits the student overall but may also benefit the university in terms of their overall retention rates. The CSSO’s experience with this group of students was that when afforded a comprehensive support framework, the FiF students are likely to continue their studies. Giving these students a comprehensive support framework to develop a positive work/study/life experience can make a difference towards their preparedness or under-preparedness and ultimately completing their studies. The CSSO role can provide students with the comprehensive support framework to enhance their confidence and their individual responsibility for their study.

Mature Age

Mature Age is another category that was identified from the COGNOS analytic data and the narratives from students. Of the 57 education students who accessed support from the CSSO in semester 2 in 2016, 33.33% were in the mature age bracket (25 and over). During semester 1 in 2017 however, only 12 (26%) were in the mature age range.

Reflecting on study reports, Moodie (2016, p. 2) stated that “students over 25 years of age are two times more likely to drop out of their studies than students aged 19 and under”. Figures produced by Moodie highlight that 41.6% of those over 25 years would not complete their degree. Of course, many other factors would have to be included within this final figure, as age alone would not support a percentage so high. Edwards and McMillan (2015, p. vi) believe “multiple compounding factors” and “varying pressures” on university students result in decreasing retention amongst particular groups, including mature age students. However, McInnes, James and McNaught (1995) suggest that mature students have clearer career direction and lower adjustment needs and are more likely to achieve higher academic results. The following is a conversation between the CSSO and a student.

Student: I'm too old to be here and I feel out of place. Everyone in my class is so much younger and I feel like they know more than I do.

CSSO reflection: I felt like he just needed a chat with someone his own age. I could feel his anguish. Fidgeting in the chair and not looking me in the eye. I needed to boost his confidence.

CSSO: What skills have helped you so far this semester?

Student: I have finished all my assessments on time. I seem to understand the content easily. I love presentations. I did them in a former job. Wow, I do know things. Maybe age is a benefit here.

CSSO reflection: He started to look me in the eye after he spoke. His smile grew. His confidence was building.

Another conversation between the CSSO and another student.

Student: My kids never let me study at home. It is always 'mum this' and 'mum that' and I just cannot get the work done. I'm thinking of leaving university and waiting until they grow up a bit.

CSSO reflection: She was devastated with her decision, and was looking to me for some advice. I learned that both her children were at school and that she only came to campus for her classes. She needed to leave early in the afternoon to collect them from school. We discussed the option of studying on campus during school hours and only doing the reading at home that she needed to complete each week for her subjects.

Student: My children go to bed early, so I could do it then.

CSSO reflection: Her voice seemed excited. She was talking faster and positive about continuing her studies. The student completed her semester and passed all her subjects. She realised that she could work on her degree program successfully. She has continued with the plan in the subsequent semesters.

The CSSO reflected that she saw a high number of mature age students who sought support for varying issues, but the majority of them had the desire to complete their degrees and did not want to give up on their dreams. The CSSO's experience is that these students are more likely to ask for help from the CSSO or the subject's academic staff and implement the strategies successfully. This gives

them an advantage over younger students who may not have the confidence to pursue support in the first place and implement the strategies (Murtaugh, Burns, & Schuster, 1999). A majority (87%) of the mature age students, who received support from the CSSO, have been able to achieve success. This success was reflected in the students passing their subjects, learning time management skills and adding more subjects to their study load. The remaining 13% of mature age students continued to get support with the CSSO in the following semester and have since achieved success with their studies.

Low SES, Living Arrangements and Work Commitments

Low SES, living arrangements and work commitments were another life circumstances that were identified from the COGNOS analytic data as well as from the narratives of students. Baik, Naylor and Arkoudis (2015) report that significantly more students from low SES backgrounds felt financial stress, or that their work commitments interfered with their study, than high SES students (75% and 59%, compared to 60% and 50% respectively). During semester 2 in 2016, only 22.81% (five school-leavers, five post-school leavers and three mature age students) had the life circumstance of low SES. During semester 1 in 2017, only ten students had the circumstance of low SES. These students were all living away from home and needed to keep part-time work.

The CSSO experienced that low SES, living arrangements and work commitments can make the CSSO role a little harder if students do not proactively acknowledge these circumstances. The CSSO also experienced that most students may not realise the impact of issues associated with these life circumstances. If students acknowledge that these life circumstances are having an effect on their studies, then the CSSO can refer them to services that could provide support. The CSSO can also proactively encourage students to reflect on these life circumstances. However, Norton (2010, p. 55) believes universities can provide an “environment of independence and freedom” but may also cause “considerable anxiety” to the students. The pressure to perform academically and the pressure of these life circumstances may produce anxiety with some of these students. With the added pressures of financial stress, the student may need to suspend their studies to pursue work (Norton, 2010).

Two students who received support from the CSSO revealed that they were living in their car and had limited food during the study period. Referral of these students to the campus counsellors and well-being staff assisted them to find accommodation, Centrelink information for payments and food supplies to get them through their semester. Although this is not a common occurrence, the CSSO needs to know how to support and refer the students in such circumstances. The following is a conversation between the CSSO and a student.

Student: I got kicked out of my home by my husband and now live in my car. I had to leave my daughter there, which breaks my heart. I have let my lecturers know and they suggested that I see you.

CSSO reflection: I felt gutted that this had happened to her. The strength she must have to admit that she needs help. The tears were flowing and I gave her a hug. She held on tight. The CSSO and student discussed support on and off campus and possible plans to address her situation.

Student: I am not going to let this deter me from my studies. I have sacrificed so much to get here. I have to get a place and get my daughter back. The student used the support services

offered to her and is now living in an apartment, has part-time work and her daughter is living with her.

The CSSO reflected that when the students gained support from her, or campus counsellors and well-being staff, they managed to achieve success with their studies for that semester. Some of these students also gained more hours of employment each week to address their financial situations and moved to part-time study. The experience of the CSSO is that the support framework offered to the students enhanced the confidence of the students and enabled them to achieve success with their studies.

Modifications to the Support Strategies

The study found that these life circumstances overlap and compound to negatively affect the students' ability to complete their studies successfully. The role of the CSSO at JCU includes monitoring participation of first-year students who display limited participation with their study activities and initiating intervention strategies. However, Wingate (2007) advises that this approach can lead to a deficit model of support if not well structured. There is need for a proactive, holistic and comprehensive support structures to address the overlapping and compounding effects of the life circumstances of students within the regional university. Two areas that can enhance such a comprehensive support framework emerged from an analysis of the reflections of the CSSO, narratives of students, and the COGNOS analytic data of first-year education students who displayed limited participation with their study activities. The areas are: (1) the need for a proactive agenda that addresses the life circumstances of all students, and (2) the need for a support structure that enhances the building of relationships to create a community of learners who can mentor and support each other.

A Proactive Agenda that Addresses the Life Circumstances

To initiate a comprehensive support framework that is proactive, the CSSO needs to address the life circumstances of all students in their college by gathering an accurate list of all possible life circumstances from the COGNOS analytic data. The data on the life circumstances of students is captured at the enrolment stage for all students and can be used to inform the proactive comprehensive support framework. An example given previously is that more than 60% of the students were FiF to attend university and more than 40% of the students were mature-age in both study periods. This comprehensive attention to the students' life circumstances would not only include first-year students but can include students in their second, third or fourth year who did not need the support during their first year. Some of the students' life circumstances in the second category can change with time, for example, living arrangements and work commitments. These second, third or fourth year students are the ones who might fall through the cracks. Some of these students might have just got a 51% pass result in their first semester and were not flagged in the first year, yet they may have life circumstances they continue to struggle with.

The CSSO needs to first analyse the life circumstances that are associated with first-year students who displayed limited participation with their study activities and then invoke the support strategies that can address the life circumstances associated with the students. However, as highlighted in the study, the life circumstances associated with most first-year students who displayed limited participation overlap or compound. This can negatively affect a student's ability to participate and complete their studies successfully in their first, second, third or fourth year. Compounding of two or

more of these life circumstances results in a higher chance for a student to participate less in their studies and can result in them failing their course. Our position is to develop a more proactive, responsive and comprehensive portfolio of strategies that can address the life circumstance and the needs of all learners. The portfolio of strategies needs to have several layers and pathways of support. This position is echoed by Wingate (2007) who suggests the need for support measures that go beyond ad hoc initiatives. The CSSO needs to use the portfolio of strategies to connect all students with support strategies and services at any time during their study career and not just focus on those who are already failing in their first year.

The study found out that the human contacts and one on one discussions with students who displayed limited participation with their study activities have a significant role supporting students. The contacts and face-to-face discussions can make the difference between a student dropping out of university or continuing with their studies. Our resolve is that it is not enough for the CSSO to address the needs of first year students who displayed limited participation with their study activities only, they must also appreciate that these life circumstances are personal to each individual student. Life circumstances are prevalent in all students and there may be a need for CSSO relationships with all students regardless of year level. This is required to ensure that comprehensive support is given to all students. The CSSO can also proactively design group and individual student support plans based on the life circumstances presented on the COGNOS analytical data. The development of specific support strategies can be done in concert with subject lecturers. The CSSO could also follow the individual students throughout the life of the degree encouraging, supporting and ensuring the students stay on track and up to date with the support available on/off campus. This support arrangement might further enhance the confidence of the students and enabled them to achieve more success with their studies.

A Support Structure that Enhances the Building of Relationships

The CSSO observed that it is not a lack of motivation or lack of ability that resulted in students to display limited participation with their study activities within the regional university. Rather, all students can be in danger of finding themselves in some of these life circumstances. The study found out that by gradually developing the students' competence and confidence as independent learners in constructing knowledge, the students were better able to achieve. Wingate (2007) suggests the need for a fundamental change in the students' belief systems and echoes this position.

In both study periods, about 23% of the first-year students displayed limited participation. However, when the CSSO worked with the students and provided them with resources that could improve or better their chance of success in their studies, as well as make referrals that helped to improve their life circumstance, the students were better able to succeed. The mature age students were more receptive to the help provided by the CSSO. There is need to build the competence, confidence and motivation of all students. Such a competence, confidence and motivation based support framework can position the students' life circumstances as parts of the same whole that can be drawn upon (as a whole or in parts) at any time to help the students during the whole university study period.

Building a community of learners who can mentor and support each other is empowering and can be one of the major roles of the CSSO. The CSSO role can also be that of a lead mentor or cheerleader, mentoring the way to an empowered student community. You do not employ a cheerleader group for one season of your football team. Mentoring of students in university is sometimes seen as a one

semester or one teaching period event. However, like the football team, the cheer squad should always be there to support the players on the field. The CSSO role can be like the cheer squad for all university students and provide not only consistent but also comprehensive support structures for the students. Such a CSSO role should be available throughout the year levels, not just for the first-year student cohort. Kift, Nelson and Clarke (2010) advice that all students are on a journey to becoming self-managing or self-directed learners and the CSSO role can provide the optimal vehicle. Our optimism is for a proactive and comprehensive support framework for all our students.

Conclusion

The study found out that the life circumstances associated with most first-year students who displayed limited participation overlapped and compounded negatively to affect the students' ability to complete their studies successfully. However, the study enabled us to reflect on the need for proactive and comprehensive support frameworks for all our students in the regional university with two components. The first involves the need for a proactive agenda that addresses the life circumstances of all students. Our resolve is that it is not enough for the CSSO to address the needs of students who display limited participation with their study activities only, they must also appreciate that life circumstances are personal and prevalent for all students and there is a need for a one on one relationship with each individual student. The second involves the need for a structure that enhances the building of relationships to create a community of learners who can mentor and support each other. Our thinking is that the CSSO role can be like the cheer squad for all university students and provide not only consistent but also comprehensive support structures for the students. Such a CSSO role should be available throughout the year levels, not just for the first-year student cohort. The study has highlighted the importance of focusing on the life circumstance associated with all students within the regional university and the need for comprehensive support frameworks. Our hope is to encourage further research on whether the life circumstances identified in this project are common to other regional universities and the comprehensive support strategies that may be required to support the students.

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