THE IMPACT OF MULTIPLE PARTNERSHIPS ON CAREER DECISION-MAKING: EVALUATION OF A PRE-UNIVERSITY PROGRAM FOR REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to design, implement and evaluate a program for senior secondary regional students making choices about their future careers. The program provided information and experiences to help students decide whether to pursue their interest in early childhood through studying at their local university. Nineteen students completed a questionnaire to determine their expectations of the program and the results were compared with data from a parallel questionnaire completed at the end of the program. The findings highlighted the importance of multiple partnerships in assisting regional students to decide career directions. Short, innovative programs such as this have the potential to be valuable additions to the present limited opportunities available outside large cities and could impact positively on regional sustainability.

STUDENTS DECIDE READY OR NOT!

Australian regional universities traditionally provide information to prospective students about their programs through the use of pamphlets, open days and information giving sessions. The pamphlets are usually distributed by administrative staff or by school guidance counsellors rather than university lecturers. Potential students, therefore, do not often have the opportunity to extract more pertinent information from staff involved in teaching the program. The main information presented to regional and rural students, therefore, is likely to be obtained largely from these same pamphlets, and to be rather generic in nature. The problem relates to how adult stakeholders, such as parents, teachers, university lecturers and industry and professional representatives from the regional community, engage students in learning about the best information upon which to make informed decisions about their future career pathways and the role of the local community in helping students attain their career goals.

The number of students who drop out or change programs within the first year of study is another area that has been, until recently, relatively ignored in the research. It seems logical that the mismatch of students to particular programs at university is often associated with those programs more likely to suffer high attrition rates. This might apply particularly to the service related professions where the general public may not fully appreciate the range of skills required by that particular profession.

A reasonable assumption would then follow that, if potential students were given access to pre-entry university programs before committing to programs at university, they would be better able to clarify their university and career goals. It is only by having all

the relevant information that one can make an appropriately considered decision. When pre-entry university programs are conducted in regional centres, they also have the potential to retain talented young people who might then contribute professionally to the community rather than be drawn to major cities and possibly not return (see also Cleary, this issue).

The purpose of the present project was to design, implement and evaluate a short pre-university program to introduce a small group of senior secondary students, interested in early childhood education, to the tertiary environment. The implementation of this program aligned well with the areas that were identified by McInnis and James with McNaught (1995) in relation to the additional information that students considered necessary in making program choices. The focus of this study is at the student level and their perceptions of what they believed was helpful information.

The two main research questions for this project relate to the perspectives of the students who participated in the pre-university program and are as follows:
1. In what ways and to what extent does being more informed about the role of the early childhood educator help students to make clear decisions about their future career choices?
2. In what ways and to what extent does a program such as this help students to clarify their career goals and future study choices?

How do high school students decide?

Much has been written about the multifaceted issues of transition from secondary school to post-compulsory and tertiary education. The research surrounding transition has covered many areas. These are as diverse as dual school/university enrolments, drop out rates from first year programs, persistence and perseverance of students over the duration of their programs, embedding of students socially and emotionally within the first year experience and work experience programs. A second area of research highlights the problems of the first year of university, the drop out rates and how universities might improve programs and pedagogy to help ease these problems (Nora & Lang, 2000; Teese, 2000). The focus of the present study, however, is on how students from regional areas make decisions about their future university programs and subsequent career choices.

The problems that students face with the transition to tertiary studies can be categorised into two areas. The first relates to problems that students encounter when gathering information about available programs and careers and the quality of information to which they have access. The second problem relates to parental influences on students' decision-making processes and the social capital that students bring to those processes.

Career and program information

Traditional sources of information enlighten students as to what is available in terms of programs, but not necessarily about careers or what careers might involve in the real world (Rhoden & Feldtmann, 2002). Whether at school with guidance officers or at university open days with administrative staff distributing pamphlets containing the same type of information, it is reported by many students that they receive an

inadequate amount of information on which to base their decisions about future life choices (Whitley & Neil, 2000).

The Tertiary Entrance Procedures Authority (TEPA) produced a report by Whiteley and Neil (2000) that investigated Queensland Year 12 students' experiences of access to information and questioned whether there were equity issues for rural and remote and low socio-economic status students. This report also found that these issues were significant for all students and not just for the target groups. The report again substantiated the view that most of the information that students received was accessed from guidance officers or school career counsellors.

Another problem encountered by students seeking career and program information related to the timing with which this information was disseminated. Students were shown to need more information than was currently forthcoming and it was recommended that distribution should begin in Year 10. The suggestion was also made that more research would be needed to understand the best timing for this dissemination (Whiteley & Neil, 2000). Hillman (2002) also questioned the timing of information distribution, as she believed that students' priorities were very different at the end of Year 12. Her research led her to believe that, in order to make a considered decision about future careers, students must engage in long-term processes of information gathering, rather than being expected to make a definitive choice in their final months of schooling.

Parental influences and social capital

Parents' perceptions have been identified as influencing high school students' decision-making. Parents' mix of "college knowledge" (Tornatzky, Cutler & Lee, 2002), however, may not match with what is appropriate for their child. Parents are often isolated from school/university open days and there is little information given through wide-reaching media such as radio or television announcements. If parents are to be empowered to help their children in making these decisions, it is important that relevant information is accessible to all and that they know what actions need to be taken, and when. This would certainly be the case for many regional and rural parents who may never have accessed tertiary education themselves.

James (2000) also pointed out that the impact of minimal information on students might not be as severe if counter-balanced by extensive social capital about the university context. Interestingly, figures on the National Institute of Dramatic Arts (NIDA) report a drop out rate for first year students of 4% as opposed to 37% for one Queensland university (Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1999). Often children who aspire to NIDA have been involved in various aspects of theatre and the arts for many years and therefore would have amassed a huge fund of cultural capital not only about possible careers but also about the expectations of this institution. It could be argued that it may be unfair to compare NIDA with the worst case scenario in Australia of 38%; however, comparing it with the best case scenario of 15% still leaves a considerable difference for us to consider.

The significance of the present study, therefore, lies in the ability of regional communities to address the needs of senior secondary students when they are making important life decisions related to their careers. McInnis and James with McNaught

(1995) found in Australia that one third of first year school leavers did not believe that they were ready to select their future university program by the end of high school. Yorke (1999) of Liverpool John Moores University in the United Kingdom also found that the wrong choice of program was among the six key factors implicated in undergraduate non-completion.

Theoretical link to the design of the pre-university program

James (2000) believed that students need better information about the less tangible qualities of a program that produce the best outcome for them during their undergraduate degree. Inspirational teaching and belonging to a thriving learning community are concepts that have been identified as pivotal influences in successful learning in the early childhood and primary phases of education. The design of the learning experiences for the pre-university program took account of the alignment of these concepts. How one achieves these outcomes in different educational contexts and, in particular, the tertiary field is the subject of much interest and debate for many in this sector.

James, Baldwin and McInnis (1999) recognised the importance of the following areas that students need to be cognisant of during the decision-making process:
   - The pedagogy of the university faculty that the students may be interested in attending.
   - The graduate standards and attributes required by the field.
   - The career pathways and financial rewards.

These principal domains were the foundation for the design of the pre-university program that is the subject of the present study. Within the current climate, it was important to provide students with accurate information and relevant and timely advice while fostering in them a link to the university and campus where the study was completed in regional Australia. Giving students all of the information and advice they require does not guarantee that they will choose appropriate programs or careers. A more explicit experience, namely the pre-university program, may lead to potential outcomes being met for students, and this seems a likely direction for many school and university partnerships in the future.

METHOD

Action research was the logical choice of method for this study as it fell within the parameters that began to emerge from the outset of the planning phase of the project. The pre-university program intended to effect change in the knowledge and skills of the attending students to help them make informed choices about their futures. The program was also aimed at enhancing the education community's understanding of how the many stakeholders' roles could improve this process and thus the program for students in future years.

Responsiveness being a key feature of action research, it was considered that being responsive to the needs of the school leaver participants would be essential within this program. The usually participative nature of action research aligns with the high degree of collaboration that the program aimed to achieve within this new learning community,

thus being consistent with Dick's (2002) conception of action research. This method was more likely to encourage greater levels of commitment from the students. Participation by the students as informed sources of information, gave the researcher a better chance of discovering what the students knew and what the researcher needed to uncover.

This study, whose intention was to focus on a small group of secondary students who were interested in early childhood education as a possible career path, took place at a small campus of a regional university. Consequently, the transferability of this study to a metropolitan university may need further evaluation. The fact that the participants were already interested in careers in early childhood was a further potential limitation of the study's generalisability.

Nineteen Years 11 and 12 students from three local high schools, who had previously nominated their interest in following a career in early childhood education, were invited to join the pre-university program. At the first session in the program, the students completed an initial survey that was specifically designed to inform the planning of the remaining four sessions. The students responded individually in writing to the following five open ended questions:

1. What do you know about early childhood education?
2. What settings are considered to be included in the early childhood profession?
3. Why have you decided to be part of this program – interested in early childhood in particular or in discovering more about university and what it can offer you?
4. Why are you interested in becoming an early childhood educator? Why do you think you will make a good teacher?
5. What would you like to learn about from this program?

The survey responses were used to develop a program consisting of a combination of informative lectures and practical experiences in preschools. The lectures incorporated the use of the document camera and videos as well as a variety of teaching strategies to cater for a range of learning styles. The students were encouraged to access and read relevant articles. They were also taken on a tour of the campus and engaged in interactive activities intended to promote self-esteem and group dynamics in a meaningful way.

Students were divided into four groups of 4 or 5 for the preschool experiences. Two groups at a time visited a state preschool centre where they observed the work of two teachers and two classes of 25 children. The students were provided with suggestions of tasks that they might complete whilst on their visit. The inclusion of field visits to preschool centres provided students with an invaluable opportunity to see the theoretical side of early childhood discussed in lectures being put into action.

The assessment designed for the program encouraged students to produce a portfolio from a number of suggested activities. The students were able to choose the type of activity with which they wished to engage, reflecting the diverse nature of the learners. The students demonstrated in their portfolios and in creative ways what they learned during the program.

During the final lecture, students participated in a group evaluation of the program. The students were asked to consider what they had learned and what areas were most effective in meeting their needs. The class was randomly divided into three groups, and provided with paper with the topics "University lectures", "School visits" or "Portfolios" written on each. Groups were asked to brainstorm as many different ideas as possible and to write the different concepts that they had learned through the various activities. Once this was completed they shared the results with the whole group. The purpose of scaffolding the activity in this way was to focus the students after a day at school in order to retrieve the relevant information from their memories. The responsibility for distilling what was considered successful was largely removed from the researcher as the students did this activity together and the following activity individually.

Each student was then given three differently coloured pieces of paper, each page being divided into three sections containing questions relating to the class sessions, the portfolio work and the preschool visits. An example of a question was "In what ways did you feel the lectures answered your queries about early childhood?" Students began the activity by deciding whether each of the activities (class sessions, portfolios or preschool visits) represented a very beneficial, moderately beneficial or less beneficial contribution to their emerging knowledge about early childhood education as a career. They then used the appropriately coloured piece of paper (pink, green or yellow respectively) on which to write their individual responses to the evaluation questions. The intention was that the three levels of coloured paper were to be used whenever necessary.

RESULTS

The results of this project represent the self-perceptions of the participants in relation to whether they felt that the pre-university program informed them more fully about the role of the early childhood educator. Secondly, the results identify whether this program helped them to clarify their career goals and future choices.

Results indicating the students' prior knowledge and questions

The results of the first survey confirmed that, while some students had limited knowledge of the age group and different settings of early childhood, they knew very little about the multifaceted nature of the early childhood teacher's role. The majority of participants (15 of 19) in response to question three indicated that they had come with the express purpose of finding out more about early childhood education. One respondent stated that she wanted to know about university life and three respondents wanted information about both topics. These data provided the impetus to include information about both early childhood and university life within the lectures. Discovering how ill-informed the students were about this career choice allowed a comparison with their perceptions after completing the pre-university program.

Question four gave an insight into what the students were thinking about with regard to their future career choices and their reasoning about that thinking. Most spoke of a love/liking for small children and some personal qualities that they thought would be beneficial to them as early childhood teachers. This self-awareness is important at this

stage; however, basic information about the teacher's role would help to confirm or reject these early ideas and feelings. The view was confirmed in responses to question 5, in which most participants wanted to gain a greater insight into the role of the early childhood educator and the career path that they were considering for their future.

The initial survey was necessary as it provided a baseline from which to identify what information the students perceived that they needed for decision-making and at this time in their lives. This valuable information formed the basis of planning to meet group and individual needs from which further negotiation could occur at upcoming lectures.

It was clear from these results and the written comments that the students were very interested in having questions about the early childhood field, the role of the teacher and the mystery of university life answered during these lectures. They indicated from the beginning that they had a clear idea of the type of information that they perceived was important and necessary for them at this time.

Results revealing the effectiveness of the pre-university program

The students completed the final evaluation survey in the last lecture and these results relate to both research questions. These results confirmed the view that the program had indeed been useful to these students in their decision-making processes.

The majority of students found that the lectures were very beneficial or beneficial in relation to the assistance that they provided in understanding more about the role of the early childhood educator and this field. Furthermore, all of the respondents agreed that visits to the early childhood centres were very beneficial as they provided a first hand experience of the field and also an opportunity to observe early childhood educators in action.

Nearly all the respondents (83%) found that the lectures catered for various learning styles and were very beneficial to students in learning more about this career path. All students appreciated the collaborative style of the lectures and therefore made positive suggestions about future pre-university programs. They clearly wanted more time to pursue their interest in the early childhood field and wanted to know more about the university and its programs and what would happen when they commenced their degree the following year. Owing to time restrictions the discussions about university life were limited to a brief conversation about campus life at a regional university and a tour of the campus.

The suggested activities that were provided for the students to carry out while visiting centres were also found to be very beneficial by 83% of the respondents. Only two respondents gave no response to this question. The overwhelming dominance of very positive responses to the above questions indicates that most respondents were satisfied that they were more informed about the role of the early childhood educator as a result of the program.

The school visits, as part of the program, were again highlighted by all respondents as being very beneficial in informing them about their future career choice. They indicated that they had a better understanding about the children who were the main stakeholders in the early childhood field. Overall their responses supported research question two,

where it was hoped that the program would clarify the students' career goals and future study choices.

In the section representing portfolio questions, the students' responses were less definitive, with 50% of respondents answering in the moderately beneficial category. They mostly agreed that the portfolio was a good way of assessing an individual's learning; however, timing in the academic year was an issue. Those who completed the portfolio enjoyed the experience and this was evidenced by the creative and innovative work submitted.

The students expressed disappointment at the late timing of the program and also highlighted the many restraints placed on them at that time of year by their school calendar. Their thoughts are captured by the following student's response: "The program is run so late in the year. We are in the middle of exams and assignments, and because it is so late in the year we don't get any marks, school-wise, out of it and so it does not become a main priority."

The following response further highlights the positive learning experience the students underwent: "Yes, it was a bad time to do them as I had lots of school work to do and I'd rather do the portfolio than school work as it was more fun."

Individual responses to the survey showed that the students were disappointed that the portfolios were not part of school assessment at this time of the year. Other pre-university programs, such as Marketing and Psychology, were held earlier in the year and their assessment procedures contributed to overall English grades. The students found that they were, at this time of year, torn between their schoolwork (in the form of assignments and exams that they must complete) and this optional task.

In summary, it can be said that the students, as a result of the program, were extremely satisfied that they were more informed about the role of the early childhood educator. They were similarly convinced that their career goals had been clarified and their future study choices had been enlightened.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study demonstrated that, for regional and rural senior secondary students to feel confident that they have all the relevant information to make an informed career or study choice, they need much more practical and widely ranging access to the field of interest than has been available to them in the past. The participating students' responses wholeheartedly concurred with James, Baldwin and McInnis (1999) that there were three important areas that students need to be cognisant of during the decision-making process.

The participants found the lectures very beneficial as they encountered the teaching strategies of this university program as it was illustrated during the lecture times. They were also very grateful to have the opportunity to discuss with teachers in the early childhood field the graduate standards and attributes required by that field. They could observe these educators' skills in action during the school visits. Through discussions and conversations with the lecturer who had been involved in the field for 20 years, the

students discovered many career pathways and were very interested in the differences in financial rewards between teaching in the early childhood field and working in the childcare sector. It is also evident that the brief exposure to early childhood centres and the professionals employed there provided further information to complement the university lectures. This information helped participants to see for themselves the relevance of this career choice.

These respondents also highlighted timing as an issue when looking at how and when to provide all the information required by students for decision-making about their futures, correlating with Hillman's (2002) findings. Even though they were specifically commenting on the timing of the program with regard to the assessment task, there was a clear indication that the end of Year 12 is a very busy time for these students. One solution could be that the timing of this program as well as a variety of other forms of information gathering may be most beneficial if delivered incrementally over a period of two to three years.

One recommendation that could be particularly important for regional and rural school leavers is to invite their parents to an informal lecture. Here specific information about the pre-university program and the activities in which the students have been involved, as well as relevant information about the campus and the degree program, its expectations and likely structures, could be discussed with these important stakeholders. For many adults from regional and rural communities this may be their first encounter with tertiary education.

As a result of this study, the researcher is not advocating that all tertiary bound students should undertake a pre-university program or that such a program should be the only source of information provided for them. It seems important that all students are exposed to a combination of many types of information around both career pathways and the educational alternatives available in pursuing these careers. Pamphlets, university/Technical and Further Education (TAFE) websites, work experience, exposure to professionals from many fields and academic advice in setting goals are all important facets of the decision-making process. This pre-university program, however, seems to fill a niche by providing students with insight, not only into the university campus and how it looks and feels but also into what James (2000) termed the "less tangible qualities" of a university program and the associated pedagogy that they will encounter in the future.

Many groups are working to assist secondary students in their transition from high school; however, for these students to gain the most benefit from these projects it seems clear that professional partnerships are a very important component (see also Cleary and Motley, Rossi & King, this issue). Strong partnerships among all stakeholders are imperative. Smaller regional and rural communities may have an advantage as the number of stakeholders is smaller and the nature of these smaller centres allows for easier and more frequent communication among stakeholders, many of whom might know one another through other community pursuits.

These partnerships will range from all forms of student–adult partnerships to teacher–parent, lecturer–parent, lecturer–teacher, lecturer/teacher–career representative and university staff–high school staff partnerships. If these many stakeholders continue to work independently, unaware of one another's aims, resources and procedures, the

overall effectiveness for students would be minimal. It is anticipated, however, that communicating and sharing ideas can lead to positive outcomes for all stakeholders.

Engaged and motivated students who are at the centre of these partnerships and have relevant information, clear goals and a lively, interested community of stakeholders supporting them are more likely to be successful in attaining their educational goals within their communities. These students are then likely to have the potential to contribute to the future sustainability of regional and rural centres (see also Henderson, Holden and Cleary, this issue).

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