

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF PERSISTENCE AND PERFORMANCE: FACTORS IN THE MOTIVATION OF FIRST YEAR TERTIARY EDUCATION STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The dilemma of student motivation at regional university sites needs to be examined to expose peculiarities in regional areas that impact on the future sustainability of tertiary education programs in those areas. The focus of this phenomenographic study was the persistence and performance of 11 first year university students. Interviews with individual participants identified qualitatively distinct categories of persisting and performing behaviours. A sense of shared responsibility between the university and students emerged as integral to ongoing achievement for students, which impacts on completion rates and ultimately the sustainability of regional campuses within their communities.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most basic observations a teacher in higher education can make is that students persist and perform in different ways and to different extents. First year teacher education students each year repeat the observable pattern of students who stay, students who go, students who perform and students who persist. This straightforward observation has led to the research question, "Why are some people better at persisting and performing in their first year of higher education than others?"

When reflecting on such a question, Raymond Lister (2003) urged caution in interpreting these behaviours based solely on observation. Being conscious of personal assumptions and those alternative assumptions of other stakeholders is pivotal in developing a deeper understanding of persisting and performing behaviours displayed by our students.

Marton and Booth (1997) acknowledged this condition by suggesting that researchers might adopt one of two positions when investigating a student's capacity to learn. Researchers might develop a perspective based on their own orientation of the world and make statements about it and its reality, or develop the capacity to understand other people's ideas or experiences of the world. This important distinction supports the discussion by Entwistle and Ramsden (1983) around research approaches to understanding learning. These authors enunciated the theoretical concept of adopting either an external or an internal perspective.

A plethora of empirical research literature exists to inform our understandings of student performance and persistence from the perspective of the outside observer. The external view locates students on a predetermined scale of achievement. An important question is whether, in taking such a view of our students, we limit what is possible in terms of understandings. Persistence and performance from the perspective of the research participants themselves, however, remain relatively untapped resources for investigating and informing our teaching and learning.

McInnis and James with McNaught (1995) found in their comprehensive analysis of first year transition to higher education that values and patterns of behaviour with respect to tertiary education and lifelong learning are created and reinforced in the first year of study. If we are to work with this assumption and create spaces to foster these outlooks, values and patterns of behaviour positively, we must understand more about the phenomenon of first year higher education study. My interest lies in what students' conceptions are of their persistence and performance in this significant year of study, which has implications for completion rates. This paper reports on the internal view of what students experience and the reality for them as individuals in the transition to university life. The focus of the research is on three questions:

1. Why are some people better at persisting in their first year of higher education than others?
2. Why are some people better at performing in their first year of higher education than others?
3. What part does motivation play in a person's persistence and performance in her or his first year of higher education?

The research has a broader significance in regional and rural Australia in that students who persist and perform in their studies at local universities enhance their capacity to contribute to the sustainability of their campus and their community (see also Henderson, Hughes and Cleary, this issue).

HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

Psychological theories often provided the basis for the early work on transition from school to university. When the emphasis on transition shifted to sociological factors, many of these theories were discarded and, more recently, research interest regarding transition has focused on the institutional context and student integration. While research in these areas is extensive and empirically based, the theory supporting this research is often not articulated well for those consulting the data. Extensive studies of student impressions within these themes quantify responses; however, individual complexities still permeate and demand a qualitative stance.

Data suggest that transition from high school to university can place significant demands on young adults (Tinto, 1982). Despite recent innovations revealed through research, Tinto's (2000) opinion is that universities are still places that isolate learners, whose learning is disconnected from that of others. Chemers, Hu and Garcia's (2001) study highlighted that the psychological orientation that students bring to the transition to university life is critical to their success in the new setting.

Chemers, Hu and Garcia (2001, p. 3) also found that "efficacy beliefs influence the particular courses of action a person chooses to pursue, the amount of effort that will be expended, perseverance in the face of challenges and failures, resilience and the ability to cope with the demands associated with the chosen university degree". West, Hore, Bennie, Browne and Kermond's (1986) and Abbott-Chapman, Hughes and Wyld's (1992) earlier studies found that the academic orientation and motivation of students were significant predictors of performance and persistence in Australian universities.

Specific research on motivation as an enabler for academic success, however, is not extensive in the Australian literature. The discussion by Linnenbrink and Pintrich (2002) of the social cognitive model of motivation, though, is pertinent to the research in the area of student psychological characteristics. One of the most important assumptions of social cognitive models of motivation is that motivation is a "dynamic, multi-faceted phenomenon that contrasts with the quantitative view taken by traditional models of motivation" (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002, p. 1). More research in the Australian context would be beneficial in order to ascertain the ways in which motivation, in all its guises, predicts persistence or withdrawal. If institutions understood more about the antecedents of motivation, courses could be designed to enhance this aspect of a student's experiences at university.

In their comprehensive study of the first year university experience, McInnis and James with McNaught (1995, p. 47) noted that the potential for an individual to develop a sense of competence and a positive academic performance at university increased with social acceptance. Studies suggest that social integration is a dominant theme for researchers to consider. Pargetter (2000) identified the loss of the support network that was so important in Year 12 as a source of concern. Peel's (2000) study of transition from school to university showed social isolation to be a major problem for many new students beginning tertiary life.

These relatively recent studies support the 1975 Vincent Tinto model of Student Integration. Tinto's Student Integration Model has been the dominant model of student attrition for over twenty-five years and has survived despite examination and criticism (McCubbin, 2003). The Student Integration Model "illustrates Tinto's assertion that academic and social integration, and goal and institutional commitment, are not separate and distinct[;] rather they have a distinct influential relationship upon each other" (McCubbin, 2003, p. 3).

Research by Evans (2000) and Kantanis (2000) at Monash University found that problems of transition are exacerbated by failure or inability to engage with and become part of peer groups of a social nature or in an academic context. Lawrence (2002) argued that academics should play a part in the process of engagement with university culture. Lawrence elaborated on this responsibility by stating that academics need to collaborate with students to help them access and negotiate the new university discourse and culture.

One piece of the montage appears to stand out as an area that permeates the issue of transition to university life. Persistence and performance of first year tertiary students and, in particular, the usefulness of motivation as a predictor of persistence and performance, appear crucial but have not assumed prominence in the literature. Regional research that takes a qualitative stance in looking at performance and

persistence as factors in the motivation of first year education students could well produce insights to add to this body of knowledge. Hence the research question, "Why are some people better at persisting and performing in their first year of higher education than others?", has significance as a topic of study for regional universities where completion rates are important not only for individual student success but also for sustaining the university presence for the benefit of the local community.

METHOD

Contextual information

Working with first year education students at a regional Australian university has provided the impetus for this research. The observed patterns of behaviour, in regard to persistence and performance with one particular group, provoked a curious interest. The actions and language of this small cohort of first year students revealed significant issues anecdotally; therefore, more formal analysis was warranted. The research reported in this paper occurred at the conclusion of this cohort's first year of higher education.

Design and procedures

Phenomenography was the research method for this study. Phenomenography relates to data collection as well as analysis, and it lends itself to small group situations (Marton & Booth, 1997). Researchers using phenomenographic methods (Lister, 2003) wish to capture a diversity of qualitative experiences, and not quantify the prevalence of each experience. Hence, a small sample group is appropriate.

The cohort of forty-nine students was given an introductory letter to explain the project. 14 students returned the interest form and expressed a willingness to participate in the study. Of these 14, 11 were interviewed, with the interviews lasting up to seventy minutes. The remaining three had commitments that prevented them from being involved over the period of time allocated to the interviews. Of the 11 interviewed, two were male. Ten transcripts were used in the final analysis; one of the male student's transcripts could not be used as this person is now deceased.

The students involved in the study were required to sign a consent form. These forms specified their freedom to withdraw from the study at any time and assurance that anonymity would be maintained. Pseudonyms were adopted during the interview stage to protect the volunteers' identities. Furthermore, before the data from the interviews were interpreted for results, students were given the opportunity to review transcripts for accuracy and remove any sections that they deemed sensitive. Students retained a copy of the transcripts for their records.

Data for phenomenographic research are the descriptions of individuals' understandings and experiences (Booth, 1997). In this case, the data consist of descriptions of the relationship between individual students and their reality of persisting and performing in first year higher education. The researcher's conceptions of those phenomena were not, therefore, a consideration in the analysis. As the researcher into the phenomena of persistence and performance in first year education students, I was mindful of my

experimenter artefact (bias) toward students with whom I had worked over the previous 12 months. This situation presented as both positive and negative for the study. It was positive in the sense that the participants were comfortable and open in the interview process; however, it was negative because of my possible preconceived ideas of the participants' persisting and performing behaviours.

Many possible sources of information reveal a person's understandings of a particular phenomenon; however, the phenomenographic method of discovery is most commonly an interview that has no definite organisation but continues until a mutual understanding between participant and interviewer is ascertained (Booth, 1997; Orgill, n.d.). My interpretation of this dictated that, while I may have had a list of questions, I was prepared to follow any unexpected conversation scenarios. This served to allay the students' caution in responding to a set pattern of questions. Being open to these digressions provided a rich description of first year tertiary life.

Analysis consisted of coming to an understanding of the structure of these descriptions. I identified qualitatively distinct categories that defined the ways in which these students experienced the phenomena of persistence and performance in higher education. By identifying and helping students develop a more productive way of dealing with persisting and performing, regional educational institutions may serve their client base in more effective ways.

RESULTS

Contextual information

This section of the paper details the results of the study in terms of the research questions. These questions are:

1. Why are some people better at persisting in their first year of higher education than others?
2. Why are some people better at performing in their first year of higher education than others?
3. What part does motivation play in a person's persistence and performance in her or his first year of higher education?

Data have been arranged so that reporting follows the order listed above: persisting behaviours first, followed by performing behaviours, then a short section on the impact of motivation on persistence and performance. Some overlap occurs between persistence and performance and this is referred to in the interpretation of the data. Each section contains an interpretative analysis before the verbatim data. An italics reminder of the interpretative analysis follows each verbatim quotation. For brevity, only one example of each interpretative analysis is included.

Persisting behaviours

Key findings to emerge from the analysis of the data relating to persistence in first year tertiary education include a need to have clear goals and an organised timetable of commitments (both family/social and university), to develop a rapport with staff and to

become part of the social fabric of university. These factors are not new in the literature, but students' conceptions of these factors and the emphasis placed on them in times of stress reveal significant complexities, perhaps previously not considered.

All participants mentioned a need for a personal schedule. Variations were noted when students emphasised which aspect of their lives was more important in the schedule. Two distinct groups emerged, one focused on university and one focused on family. These two discrete groups appeared committed to their choice and found success with their timetable or schedule; however, a third group acknowledged the need for a timetable, but had no ongoing commitment to using this tool. Illustrative quotations are listed below:

It's just got to fit in with the rest of the day. It's just got to juggle in with the — yeah, like, I'm doing this because I've got a goal at the end, I'm dedicated to it, I want to get there, but at the same time there's a lot of other things that learning has to fit in with, so I find when I'm here at uni through the day I'm here to learn and that's my time when I'm learning and as I'm going home I become the mother. I think, "Okay, I've got to just put that aside for now", so I suppose it's like with, yeah, I think right back from when the kids were little, everything had its — you know, like a timetable sort of thing in your head, so you've got time, you know, you're here, to be studying and then I'm going home, okay, so that stops for a while and I'll be, do the mother thing and then I'll get back in and study a bit more. It's like a routine, I suppose, that I have.
(Family focused schedule)

One thing I have changed is my organisation skills and my time management which in effect has affected my family because they've had to slot into my time and my organisation which doesn't suit them all the time. *(University focused schedule)*

Well, I have done up a timetable that I've stuck to in the last two weeks, and it's just got everything in it, but it's hard to stick to it, because you have family and things just change. You can't predict how you are going to organise your week. *(No ongoing commitment to a schedule)*

Having friends and being socially connected played out as pivotal for some students. Others saw their lack of persistence as a direct result of not engaging in initial bonding activities. Still others noted with whom they want to become connected. Within the responses to this idea of social connectedness we find a deep sense of the importance of such connectedness, not only in a social sense but in academic preparedness as well; however, this was articulated as something that takes time to establish. Illustrative quotations are listed below:

Is there such a word as 'connectedness', that everybody's connected I think and we've all got to know each other and we're all here for the same reason and we've all got our little areas that we can head off into, but we're all here to learn to be a teacher. *(Social integration)*

A big mistake I made was not, at the very start, when we had all those, the little activities with, you know getting to know everyone — I realise that I haven't made that connection with a lot of people just in the course and that's been a real big problem because it would just be a lot better to know who they are and what they're like and you know it would be a lot more comfortable sitting in a room with them and group work would be a lot more easier, which now I kind

of pull back and am nervous because everyone else knows everyone else in this group but not many people know me. I wasn't very open in the first semester and it's just built up and it's been a big problem. (*Social isolation*)

I will try, really try and work on planning better like I do see people keep really good diaries — it might help me. I ask the group, I do rely on the group for support, for example, "What have we got now?" or "When's that due in?" and things like that and I don't see that as a problem, I think it's just a communicating thing. (*Social integration helping academic preparedness*)

It just takes time to get to know people, to get to know routines. (*Time to make social connections and academic understandings*)

Most participants commented on persistence being enhanced through clear identification of goals. The range of goals could be viewed as belonging to three distinct categories. Firstly, a number of participants valued learning for their self-development and long-term satisfaction as the ultimate goal driving persistence at university:

I didn't come to university to get a job at the end. I mean a job at the end will be great, but after STEPS [a pre-undergraduate preparatory program] last year and doing really well with that, I thought, "I'm going to give this a go", because I didn't do my Junior Certificate, I did one month of Year Ten and there were family hassles so I just left school, and I never thought I'd finish my education. So this is a personal goal for me more than anything and to have that piece of paper at the end is more than the job's worth. Just to say, "Hey, I've finally succeeded". (*Goal for life*)

Secondly, a group saw the finishing of the degree to achieve their vocation as most important in persisting at university:

Well, the reason I'm here is because I used to work in a child care centre where I was the assistant so you are at the bottom and you are not always treated with a lot of respect, so that's what keeps me going. When I feel like giving in, I think, "No, I want to be better than that". (*Goal for the job*)

Thirdly, others understood persisting as more immediate, short-term goals, for example, getting to the end of a week or handing in an assignment. Not having clear long-term goals to keep focus on the bigger picture seemed to cloud this group's idea of persistence:

Well, I persisted in first semester because — like I said, I had set goals as opposed to second semester where I kind of lost focus early and it started a domino effect and it just like ... If something bad starts off for me, if something starts off bad I'll kind of leave it and just go with it, whereas the first semester started off real well and I wanted to finish it ... but in second semester with not knowing, missing the first three days of uni and not having my assignment sheets and not chasing them up and getting lazy I just thought, "Oh, okay, I'll just wait for this to finish and go with it, which wasn't a very good idea, I know ... Yeah, I didn't persist too well this semester. (*Goals not clear*)

Persisting and performing merge

The final category of identification for a students' persistence in first year higher education presents as a familiarity with university culture – specifically, university languages, practices and policies. This, at a micro level, equates to talking to and seeking feedback from lecturers. While certain groups saw lecturers' support and feedback as helpful to persistence, others related it to performance, indicating that feedback and the process for giving feedback can be difficult to accept initially. The quotations below illustrate different ways that students viewed feedback:

I'm not probably so shy to talk to lecturers any more. If I do have a problem I come straight to the lecturer and ask them. At first I was probably asking the opinions of other students, so they can lead you in the wrong direction. So I communicate a lot stronger with the lecturers here. *(Support and feedback now welcomed as part of the discourse of university)*

And the negative feedback too, even though it's constructive, it's still, "Oh, am I not good enough?", and that makes you feel unmotivated until you think back, "Hang on, I am okay, I'll get there". *(Learning to understand the discourse of university)*

Performing behaviours

The examination of performance for first year higher education students reveals again this notion of university discourse as a relevant feature in constructing and maintaining barriers to performing in successful ways for some people. This is illustrated by one person's account of hiding from the university discourse:

Every time I'd run away, from like, run away from a lecture or something, I wouldn't feel good at all and I'd sit there and I'd keep watching like a clock, just the second three o'clock came around when a lecture would be finished and I wasn't supposed to be there, it was just a big relief. It's hard to explain. *(Uncomfortable with the cultural discourse)*

When asked "What is a good performance for you at university, what does that look like and what does that feel like?", two classifications of perceptions emerged. The first category of response is effort rewarded with a corresponding grade. Students in this category correlate a good performance with a good mark:

A good performance for me? I could say getting an essay in on time, and getting good marks. *(Performance as a final mark)*

This type of response has ramifications for group work situations where students judge a performance by their final result:

I probably do judge them against what I expect from myself, but at the same time you realise that some people aren't capable of applying themselves to get there, but it's probably as much my fault in that, if I don't think someone is going to do it well, I'd rather do it myself. *(Judging others)*

The second category of response takes a more holistic view of performance and looks for clear signs of personal growth:

At school I just wanted to get it done, finish school and get it over and done with, but here I want to understand what I'm doing and do a good job at it. I just don't want to finish it; I want to know why I'm doing it. (*Personal growth*)

Motivation as a factor in persisting and performing behaviours

Within the data collected for persistence and performance in first year tertiary education, motivation appeared as a key to enhancing both areas under examination. Key links can be made to what has been identified as university discourse and culture. Understanding ways of operating within the discourse, and becoming enculturated in the social and academic rituals directly, impact on motivation as an enabler for persistence and performance. This is illustrated by the quotations listed below:

Different to school, because with school you are always prompted and I've been used to that for 12 years, having someone behind your back checking work. I went to [X school] and they're good with that. They're just constantly pushing you to — you know, if you don't do work, and you know, you have to and yes, so it's pretty different. It's very self-directed, like that's how I feel and I'm having trouble adapting to the whole do it yourself. My parents are backing me up but not as much as I got in high school. (*Motivation as a predictor of persistence and performance*)

I was trying to find out what she wanted and what she expected and then I was — annoyed is not the right word, I was disheartened by the fact that no matter what I tried I wasn't getting it, what she wanted. I wasn't — I didn't understand what she wanted me to perform, and so I did lose a lot of motivation with that because I kept thinking, "What am I going to do now? I can't do anything else". (*Motivation as a predictor of persistence and performance*)

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Background information

While this small study accessed only one source of information, that is, transcripts of interviews, ongoing studies may provide opportunities for triangulation of these data. This does not, however, make invalid the findings reported in this paper. The verbatim descriptors allow the reader to experience the participants' actual language, dialect and personal meaning.

Significance

Evidence from the transcripts presented in this paper highlights the interplay of goal commitment, academic and social integration and experience after entry for university students and the influence that these factors have on university performance. All interviewees discussed these issues in the course of the conversation as they related to persistence and performance. Patterns of behaviour, within the first year of learning, were revealed from the students' internal perspective, and participants acknowledged the influential relationship of factors contributing to persistence and performance. The

discourse shared by the participants, who acknowledged a multiplicity and interplay of factors, has a theoretical link with the 1975 Vincent Tinto model of Student Integration.

What is unique with this small study, however, is this researcher's newfound illumination of just how important the enculturation process is to first year students. It appears that persistence and performance are dependent on a student becoming familiar with the *modus operandi* of the university. This is not to say that we have a need for one dominant mainstream discourse reinforcing the assumption of one mainstream academic culture. Rather, regional universities need to develop cultures that celebrate what is unique to them while welcoming difference in students (see also Henderson, this issue). By building a capacity for all stakeholders to own the culture of the institution, we create the familiarity necessary for the sustainability of regional universities.

While most students achieve familiarity given time, as per transcript data, some find the transition to the cultural values and norms of university a difficult task. The ways of operating and ways of knowing, in university contexts, need to be far more transparent, enabling persistence and performance to be positively reinforced early in the first year of study. Explicit performance and persistence indicators need to be built into the initial stages of student enculturation to facilitate success for student cohorts.

Explicit indicators may come in the form of language and action. Staff (administrative and academic), by their language and action, need to acknowledge and value the culture from which students come, while stating clear expectations of the new institutional culture. This language and action need to be sensitive but direct. Specifically, if we refer to the issues that the participants identified, the experience after entry must connect to goal identification and reinforcement, knowledge of academic expectations and opportunities for social interaction for all students. This needs to be embedded in the daily actions and language of staff and not just as a feature or component of specific courses. If this is done, individual students have multiple opportunities to engage with key messages reinforcing what matters if success is to be forthcoming with their chosen degree.

The motivation to maintain persistence and performance is not a single feature (as evidenced here); rather, it is a collection of internal and external factors operating independently and collectively. The dialogue in the participants' interviews reinforces Linnenbrink and Pintrich's (2002) social cognitive model of motivation. Most participants described motivation influencing persistence and performance but acknowledged the inconsistency of personal motivation. Hence, as far as institutionally possible, we determine a need to keep motivation levels high early in our first year students' forays at university. The antecedents to motivation at an institutional level were described as enjoyment of a course, social connection and understanding and gaining from feedback.

Achieving these antecedents, at both micro and macro levels, is important. For example, enjoyment of a course can occur at a micro level with the lecturer's choice of content and delivery style but also at a macro level with the enrolment process and the ease with which the student might engage with this process. If academics and the systems within the academics' institution can address the power relationships that have the potential in university contexts to alienate and delay enculturation, attrition may well be eased. Empowering students to know how to act within university contexts creates a non-

threatening and transparent discourse. Lecturers achieve this through value-added teaching.

Value in teaching equates to looking at more than content; it is going beyond delivering a course to supporting, mentoring and motivating the individuals within that course. An example is discussion and collaboration between lecturer and student on goal identification; however, this dialogue requires time and effort on the part of all stakeholders. Recognising and giving credence to this duty is vital if the performance and persistence of first year students are to be a shared responsibility.

Persistence and performance are factors in the motivation of first year tertiary students, including those who, like the participants in this study, attend Australian regional universities. Hence, university staff and university systems need to acknowledge the collaborative nature of the learning journey and share the responsibility for a future that sustains teaching and learning in the local community. When this happens we will indeed be a university culture connected by understanding and tolerance and not dominated by power and blame.

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