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Fulfilling dreams: Transitions into an ECE online preservice teacher education degree.

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Abstract

There is increased attention on the first year experience at universities generally as a result of the Australian federal government's focus on increased accountability for universities and widening participation in further education (DEST, 2003; Jardine & Krause, 2005; Kift, 2005; Krause, Hartley, James & McInnes, 2005). However, these studies do not address preservice education programs specifically nor do they take into account the experiences of students who embark on teacher preparation courses in virtual environments. There have been few, if any, studies that focus on the experiences of traditionally marginalized groups. This paper builds on research conducted in 2007 (Taylor, 2008; Taylor& Worsley, 2008) and investigates transitions into the Early Childhood Education degree introduced in 2007. It draws on 3 years of university, School and subject data and reveals specific transition issues for online students. Findings suggest more imaginative ways in which both universities and public policy makers can support successful participation of traditionally marginalized groups in online preservice teacher education programs.

Keywords: First year experience; online learning; access; equity.

Introduction

James Cook University (JCU) has a proud tradition of providing quality, higher education in regional Queensland. Historically, the majority of teacher education students are from combinations of traditionally marginalised groups: lower socio-economic; first in family to attend university; mature-age women; from rural and regional Queensland. School leavers generally represent just 30% of the first year internal preservice teacher education cohort each year on the Cairns campus. Whilst this context challenges us as teacher educators in terms of pedagogy and support for students, particularly in their first year of study, the School has an enviable track-record of success in developing quality teachers for local and international contexts. In 2007, the School of Education at James Cook University (JCU) introduced a Bachelor of Early Childhood Education (ECE) degree offered in a wholly online mode. Now in its third year, the course continues to attract strong and increasing enrolment numbers.

In 2007, as a lecturer in the first year core professional studies subject, I collected data and began to research students embarking on the ECE online degree (Taylor, 2008, Taylor & Worsley, 2008). I was interested in knowing who my learners were and how I might best teach and support them as they embarked on a teacher education program a virtual world. This first professional studies subject in the degree program sets the socio-historico-cultural context of schooling and teachers' work. It also includes an embedded five days of professional experience in a school setting in the early weeks.

This paper builds on the 2008 research (Taylor, 2008, Taylor & Worsley, 2008) and focuses on issues of *transition* into the online degree. Australian studies into the experiences of first year undergraduates (Krause, Hartley James & McInnes 2005; McInnes & James 1995; McInnes, James & Hartley 2000) focus on on-campus students, not on students who engage with tertiary studies wholly online, nor do they specifically relate to preservice teacher education. This inquiry draws on

three years of data. Whilst the university collects quantitative enrolment data including student ages, mode of entry, geographical location and socio-economic status, this provides little insight into students' lifeworlds as they grapple with the doubly alien environments of university study and online learning. Using a mixed-method approach (Patton, 1990) data were collected from general enrolment information, student responses to orientation activities, quantitative retention information collected at a School level and my own reflective journal and meeting minutes as the School's First Year Coordinator.

Context

The experience of first year students in universities in Australia has been the focus of three major Australian studies commissioned by the Federal government (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2004; Krause, Hartley James & McInnes, 2005). This interest has been triggered by widening access to tertiary education, particularly for traditionally marginalised groups. Federal government scrutiny of higher education institutions and has also encouraged universities to focus more sharply on first year student experiences for reasons of quality, accountability, support and retention. JCU, in common with other institutions across Australia, has developed a range of orientation and pre-university access courses as a way of attracting larger numbers and a broader student demographic through their doors. Krause (2005) argues that while these university initiatives are necessary in attracting more students into tertiary study, they are not sufficient in ensuring that needs of specific demographic subgroups of students are met so that they can complete their degrees successfully.

The purpose of the original study (Taylor, 2008) was to understand the particular characteristics of learners engaging in first year tertiary study wholly online in order to improve the quality of their experience. The 2008 research (Taylor, 2008; Taylor & Worsley, 2008) was based on the first year the online degree program was offered (2007). It found that in the cohort of 127 students in this program, just three were male and 81 lived in regional Queensland (some local to the University in Townsville and Cairns). One student came into the course through direct entry from school, the remainder all came in through mature-age entry pathways. 115 students were over 25 years old. Online Discussion Board introductions indicated that all ECE online students were involved in full or part time work and/or family duties. 110 female students worked in the child care industry or as teacher aides in schools in addition to having family responsibilities. By contrast, in the on-campus student cohort in 2007 (140 students) 41 had direct entry from schools, 11 were male. All internal students were working to support themselves during their study. None was working full time although 6 students indicated that they worked more than 30 hours per week in casual employment at the weekend or at night. The data collected however were not directly comparable between cohorts as the on-campus version of the subject included students in Early Childhood, Primary and Secondary programs whereas the online cohort included only Early Childhood Education students.

The 2008 studies (Taylor, 2008; Taylor & Worsley, 2008) found that most online students (110 females) spoke about fulfilling a long-held dream to become a teacher, their love of work in Early Childhood and their desire to gain qualifications specifically in that area. 20 students (male and female) saw the online course as an opportunity to become a teacher as their interest in education had been sparked by an interest in their own children's education and, having spent time in schools and enjoying it and not having to "give up everything" to study. The JCU online program clearly provided access to and opportunity for teacher education for these students where none had existed before. The study also showed that most students regarded their biggest challenges as technology and time management. Few students had engaged with internet technologies prior to commencing study and some had bought a computer specifically to commence the online course. As discussed previously, the majority of students had both full-time work (in the childcare sector) and family commitments.

Transitions

This study identified three main transition issues for ECE online students:

1. Time and academic engagement
2. University, online and academic orientation and;
3. Building a professional identity.

Kift (2009) outlines six organising principles of first year curriculum which support academic engagement, success and retention and argues that "The curriculum should be designed to be consistent and explicit in assisting students' transition *from* their previous educational experience *to* the nature of learning in higher education." (n.p.nos.) The author's 2008 study and ongoing data collection at a School level provided insights into students' previous education experiences. In consistent patterns over the 3 years we saw that >70% of online students had TAFE certificates (Level 3) in Early Childhood education or as Teacher Aides and <10% had had previous experience in university study. Where they had had experience in university study, those experiences had been either negative or interrupted early due to family and other life commitments.

1. Time and academic engagement

Between 2007 and 2009 the demographic characteristics of ECE online students have remained constant, as have enrolment numbers in the program. ECE online students are a generally homogenous group of predominantly mature aged women with families and/or work in the childcare sector or as teaching assistants in early childhood classrooms. Approximately 70% live in regional areas.

Masterman-Smith and Pocock's (2005) study into Australia's working poor (cleaners and childcare workers) provides insights into issues the majority of these students may face on a daily basis, even when not studying. They are already likely to be "both *income* poor and *time* poor" (p.3). That ECE online student experience poverty of time is confirmed by two sets of data from this study. First, the LearnJCU site statistics from 2007-2009 show that the majority (>80%) of students regularly engage with learning between 9pm and 1am when family and work commitments are finished. Second, JCU enrolment data reveal that, despite specific guidance in enrolment information and on JCU's website, more than 70% of ECE online students continue to enrol in a full-time study load in the first semester despite significant work and family commitments. Full-time study requires a minimum of 40 hours time commitment. Unsurprisingly, all bar one student who withdrew from subjects prior to the census date in 2009 cited the unrealistic workload they had undertaken as their reason for withdrawal. The sole exception had been forced to move home and now had no access whatsoever to the internet, effectively preventing her from continuing. Exit interviews from withdrawing students revealed that students were aware that they would be time poor but the prospect of extending a four year degree to potentially six or eight years with a more manageable workload seemed impractical.

The 5 day professional experience component in the core professional studies subject proved a pragmatic issue for many online students. In order to complete the professional experience, they had to take leave from their jobs. Aside from the financial penalties they incurred, as the majority were working in educational environments, students reported that their absence during term time was often not viewed favourably by employers and around 20% of withdrawing students reported having to do so rather than risk losing their employment altogether. As preservice teachers have to complete 100 days of professional experience over their program, it is difficult to see how they will be able to negotiate this demand which increases each year *and* meet their financial and work commitments.

2. University, academic and online orientation

Most online students cannot attend face-to-face orientation programs. Research conducted into the first year of the program in 2007 (Taylor, 2008) highlighted the need for online students to have

strong and timely orientation programs, particularly in the pragmatics of JCU's Learning Management System (LearnJCU) in order to be able to study successfully. In 2008, a specific online community was created within LearnJCU to provide university orientation for online ECE students. In addition, JCU peer mentors developed an online resource to address the pragmatic and social networking issues experienced by online students that were highlighted in the 2008 study (Sinnamon, Worsley & Taylor, in press). James Cook University was one of the first higher education institutions in Australia to introduce a peer mentoring program. Data from the ECE online program in 2007 highlighted the urgency to develop a peer mentoring program (PMP) that mirrored the success of the internal program (Treston, 1999) which had been running for 19 years. Student mentors, Teaching and Learning professional staff and first year lecturers collaborated in the development of the online peer mentoring program which commenced in 2008. An indication of the program's success is that 2009 enrolment data indicates that no student who engaged in the online PMP has withdrawn from the degree. In addition, JCU's tracking and monitoring initiative "On Track" has been expanded and resourced to include online students. Early data suggest that both of these initiatives have had a positive impact on retention.

Despite these initiatives, *academic* orientation still tends to occur within specific subjects. A better understanding of the ECE online students through research conducted in 2007 and 2008 has generated better pedagogical and support strategies. Nevertheless, the experience of first year lecturers in the first semester of the online program reflects the significant and resource-intensive work needed to both orient and support the transition of these students into tertiary *and* online study.

The majority of online students, as with on-campus students, are from traditionally marginalised groups; mature aged women from regional areas who are first in family to attend university. Many come into the course with extensive experience in Early Childhood Education settings and with TAFE qualifications. However, there are challenges for these students in moving from competency-based workplace learning as occurs in in the TAFE Certificate 3 in Childcare or Teacher Aiding into an academic and professional program such as a Bachelor of Education.

A key challenge on entry to the course continues to be traditional and new literacies. Data collected between 2007 and 2009 show that the majority of online students have poor academic and digital literacy skills on entry confirming contemporary research into the nexus between literacies, marginality and social access.

> Globalisation and technological advancement have altered the kinds of literacies students need to negotiate productive social futures. Literacy is, or rather multiliteracies are, an important component of social access. In the *Literate Futures* report (Education Queensland, 2000) the authors propose that "Post industrial society is already fracturing into information/technology rich and information/technology poor socio-economic classes. Poverty, socioeconomic exclusion and cultural marginality remain powerful forces in the shaping of who gets which literacy and to what end these can be used." (p.8)

Sutton (2006) states "Online learners in Australia are predominantly middle-aged women; this is the group that is most likely to have problems with multiliteracies and particularly e-literacy." (p.110). However, by the end of first semester both this inquiry and the 2008 study showed that students supported each other and often found innovative, idiosyncratic ways of navigating the technology and supporting their peers.

3. Professional experience and professional identity

Aside from the financial and practical issues related to the completion of professional experienced discussed above, data collected between 2007 and 2009 from professional experience and academic advisory staff highlighted a growing trend in ECE online students' requests for recognition of their paid work as "professional experience". They argued that they were already undertaking classroom

tasks in excess of the requirements of the first year professional experience so this should be recognised in terms of Recognition of Prior Learning or Recognition of Current Competency, using the current TAFE assessment terminology. The Queensland College of Teachers (QCT) accredits preservice teacher education programs in Queensland against professional standards (QCT, 2006). By the end of their program, preservice teachers need to demonstrate evidence against all 10 standards in the areas of knowledge, practice and values, not just competency in practice. Although first year students are introduced to the professional standards for teachers (QCT, 2006) we clearly need to focus on the *professional* identity of a teacher from the outset and make apparent to ECE online students how professionals' and paraprofessionals' work intersects but does not equate.

Implications

Students' unrealistic expectations of the time commitment required to complete a teacher education degree have implications for first year, first semester lecturers who typically provide resource-intensive support particularly in the early weeks of a subject. Neither student nor lecturer 'investment' is necessarily rewarded in retention data within subjects. Subject retention statistics at JCU, as in other institutions, are considered an indicator of 'good' teaching and contribute to evidence for promotion. Course enrolment data, however, show that students do not tend to withdraw from the program altogether, rather, they tend to reduce their loads, albeit reluctantly, in order to continue studying. Student profiles and advice have been incorporated into the ECE online website to encourage new students to consider their existing time commitments before enrolling in heavy study loads but, as yet, these seem to have had little impact.

The innovations and initiatives introduced in 2008 and 2009 have had an immediate impact and continued monitoring and evaluation at a School and cohort level is needed to support ECE online students' retention and success. University level data is simply not fine enough to provide insights into the issues ECE online students face. JCU has introduced a First Year Coordinator role in each School/campus to monitor and support the first year experience. This inquiry showed that collaborations between first year lecturers, tutors, Teaching and Learning Development staff and mentors in planning, assessing and supporting students were particularly helpful in highlighting and responding to common issues across subjects and across the cohort.

Relationships and pathways between TAFE Certificate 3 courses and ECE degrees are an area for ongoing evaluation and review. The majority of ECE online students come into JCU via this TAFE pathway but there appears to be little articulation in a pedagogical sense between the two sectors and this is to the detriment of the students. This is an area JCU certainly intends to address in the immediate future.

Supporting ECE online students, particularly those from traditionally marginalised groups is resource and time intensive. Universities and individual staff cannot do it alone. Access does not necessarily equate to opportunity, particularly when wider public policy and attendant resourcing continue to militate against success for marginalised groups. Teacher education is currently a national priority in Australia. The increased credentialing of workers in the early childhood sector is also key strategy in the current Federal government's educational reforms. Teacher education programs are a way of lifting many childcare workers out of a poverty (and welfare) trap (Masterman-Smith & Pocock, 2005) a point not lost on many of the ECE online students at JCU (Taylor, 2008). For some, online teacher education provides the *only* possible pathway to fulfil their long-held dreams of becoming a teacher with the increased access to economic and social capital this qualification would provide.

On March 10 2009, a media statement on the official Australian Labor Party website (http://www.alp.org.au/media/0309/msece108.php) by Parliamentary Secretary for Early Childhood Education and Child Care, Maxine McKew, announced "Australia has more than 100 000 people

working in early childhood education and child care. They are at the frontline of our children's development and wellbeing". However, public policy (and attendant resources) to support these initiatives is at best unimaginative. Increasing Early Childhood Education places at universities and reducing a Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) debt are unlikely to assist JCU ECE online students complete their degrees. ECE online students need support during their studies and so do their employers. Extra Early Childhood Education places provide some access to teacher education (for those able to access a university) and HECS subsidies will provide some relief should students complete their degrees and begin work but there is little recognition that a student embarking on an online degree who is *already* income and time poor is at high risk of non-completion. To undertake the degree even in part-time mode would mean a minimum of 20 hours per week on top of other commitments and the degree would take 8 years. Low paid workers, such as those in the childcare sector, can ill afford the time or financial penalties they and their families will incur as they are becoming teachers. Government assistance in terms of individual study support grants and employer support funding would enable more childcare workers to participate in higher education successfully *and* expedite increased credentialing of staff in the Early Childhood sector.

Conclusions

In *The Australian* (23 March 2006) the then Federal Education Minister, Julie Bishop, noted that "a qualified early childhood teacher is necessary to the delivery of preschool education." While university Schools of Education and individual staff strive to make a difference in terms of access and outcomes in teacher education for marginalised groups, they are only part of the solution. Access only becomes opportunity when the conditions for learning and success extend beyond preservice teacher education institutions and into the real lifeworlds of students. If they do not, becoming a teacher will remain an unfulfilled dream.

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