

Student/Worker/Carer

The intersecting priorities of Arts students

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This article reports on a focus group study of student experience and learning in a large humanities and social science faculty in Australia. The study explored student study/work/life issues, and student learning experiences. The article reports specifically on a discussion about combining meaningful learning in university classrooms with other life aspirations. Students revealed considerable capacity to integrate competing life demands. While students described instrumental practices and pragmatic approaches to reading and assessment demands, their comments revealed a desire for deeper learning.

Background

Recent debates in the higher education sector in Australia have focused on key issues affecting student experience, including staff-student ratios, resources available to the sector and equitable access for all students (ACOSS 2003; Edwards 2007). Of equal concern has been how student patterns of employment are reshaping university experiences for both student learners and academic teachers. There has been recognition in Australian higher education, as elsewhere, that traditional patterns of student engagement are being changed by student debt and student employment. As McInnis (2004) argues, there is a pattern of change, consistent across the Western world, requiring new frameworks for student learning:

Many of the assumptions about students that underpin earlier studies are no longer sustainable The mix of 'learner- earners' and 'earner-learners' is shifting in many countries. A reappraisal of just where university fits in the lives of many students is needed (McInnis 2004, p. 383).

Concern about these changes in student cohorts has often centred on students' capacity to complete

studies effectively and fully engage with learning while negotiating other demands. Previous research from the United States, Canada and Australia has found that employment has a negative effect (Curtis 2002), but this is not a simple equation (Bradley 2006) with many students relying on paid work as well as study to facilitate future employment. As McInnis and Hartley note (2002), the diversity of student employment patterns makes the development of effective teaching and administrative practices a challenge for universities. This article seeks to contribute to existing knowledge about student expectations and experiences, illuminate some aspects of student study/work/life balance and add qualitative insights to existing student satisfaction data.

The research project from which these findings emerged was focused on key challenges for undergraduate students in successfully completing their studies in a faculty of humanities and social sciences. Anecdotal evidence and the profile of students before the Academic Progress Committee each year suggested that many students were struggling with commitments to paid work, family responsibilities and other life issues. These insights were not grounded in concrete data on

students' expectations of their study load. Nor were they grounded on the combined effect of paid work, family responsibilities and study load on students, nor on what supports would be most effective in assisting students to complete study requirements optimally while balancing other life commitments. This study's focus was to provide some direct data on these issues to inform Faculty of Arts policy.

Methodology

The setting for this 2007 project was the Faculty of Arts at Monash University, one of the largest humanities and social science faculties in Australia. The objectives of the study were to develop a better understanding of the specific challenges students face in completing their studies successfully; to provide insights that might assist in the development of new resources to support students where applicable and to provide information that might improve the targeting of existing study support resources. The findings

were intended to support the Faculty's commitment to pastoral care for students and to inform Faculty responses to the perceived increasing study-life pressure for students. In addition, the project had the aim of contributing to knowledge in higher education on student experience and student learning.

Focus groups were chosen as a method for data collection because they offered the opportunity to identify substantive issues and gain in-depth insights while encompassing the views of a larger sample of students than individual interviews would have allowed. Hamel (2001) suggests that focus groups allow for 'open discussion of topics under considerations and [the production of] an immediate analysis by collating the viewpoints of the participants' (2001, p. 242). Ethical approval was obtained from the university ethics committee and informed consent was sought and obtained from each focus group participant. Twelve focus groups were conducted in all, with 48 students participating from the metropolitan and regional campuses of the University.

Focus group participants were recruited using a number of methods. Posters were put in relevant public areas around the university and announcements

were made in some lectures. In addition, bulk emails were sent to groups of students outlining the study. Students were invited to express interest by contacting a researcher. Details of the study were generally forwarded with an explanatory statement. Some students were encouraged by friends to attend; all participants were provided with hard copy explanatory statements in the focus group setting. In addition, students filled in a brief questionnaire providing data on age, enrolment, hours of study and employment, living situation and equity-related information.

The students who participated ranged in age from 18 to 60 years of age, with 28 participants aged between 18 and 24 years. The majority of students were enrolled full time, with eight of the students enrolled part time. Many of the students self-identified as coming from

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the University's designated equity groups: 20 indicated they were the first in their family to attend university; three identified as students from rural or isolated areas in Australia; four identified as students experiencing long-term family difficulties; nine identified as students

who had been absent from the education system for a significant period of time; two identified as students with a disability, and seven identified as students from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds. No students who identified as Indigenous Australians participated in the study. Students were able to indicate as many equity categories as they wished.

Approximately half were single and half were partnered. Fourteen of the participants had direct caring responsibilities (ranging from one to five children), although others reported significant care activities. All participants were asked to fill in a short form outlining their hours of work, living arrangements and care responsibilities. The following schedule of questions was asked in focus groups:

- Could you please tell us what the key issues are for you in managing your study requirements?
- What impact does paid work have on how you manage study?
- What aspects of family life have the most impact on how you manage study?
- What times are most stressful for you in the semester?
- What strategies have you found useful in managing your different obligations?

- Have you any suggestions about how the Faculty could support you better?

Each focus group session was taped and fully transcribed. Initially the transcripts were read and a table of key matters raised by students was developed. From this, the key matters raised by students were clustered under four key themes. These were: expectations and assumptions; academic resources and assessment; multiple priorities; and families and care. Transcripts were then re-read by the research team and coded according to these themes. This method was adopted after Cameron (2001), where the participants' responses were used as the basis for the interpretative categories.

Findings

In this article, we have focused on the intersection of studies, paid employment and social life as students described it. We were particularly interested in how students balanced the competing demands they face. We found that students did experience conflicts caused by competing priorities of employment, care and study. We found that students felt confused by some aspects of learning and studying. But these students managed these competing pressures effectively, with only five indicating they felt they were not coping with university life. Most expressed willingness and ability to juggle complex and competing priorities and an understanding of learning beyond the consumer model sometimes understood to govern student relationships with universities (see James 2001, McInnis 2004 for further discussion). In the following sections, we report on the four themes we identified from the focus groups. In each section, we have used student quotations to support and represent the main elements of our findings.

Expectations and assumptions

Our study revealed a number of important gaps between students' expectations of university life and study and the realities they found. Initially, students struggled to identify what was expected of them in this new environment and what sort of support was available.

In my first year here, which would have been my second year doing subjects, [I felt] ... 'well I'm kind of here in this big place but I'm not connected to it – I kind of come here and go to the lectures and I go home and I do my assessment tasks and I submit them and they come back'. But in those early stages

I [didn't have] ... not an enormous amount of support or feedback and I would actually say that that is the most important thing as a student; to know if you're on the right track.

This was often more pronounced for students who came from schools where university entrance was not expected.

In high school I was never taught much about what uni life was going to be like probably because they didn't expect any of us to end up there. ... I ... jumped from high school where you didn't really have so much expectation and pressure on you, to the uni life where it's completely different and I never got really any training on how to manage time or anything.

There has been significant attention to transition to university life (Hillman, 2005; Krause et al., 2005; Turnbull et al., 2006), with many universities developing new approaches to assist students in settling into university life. But the students who participated in this study came from all year levels and their responses indicated that the need for guidance continues well beyond the first year transition.

With honours it would be good if there was a bit more guidance. ... I have my supervisor and I have my coursework subject but I still feel... writing a thesis is a very different format to what I am used to, writing a 2,500 word essay and you're getting the coursework essay [at] 6,000 [words]. I am not used to writing something that long... I would like a bit more guidance about how to actually go about writing it.

Students did reveal willingness to seek help with thirty of the students seeking assistance at some time from university services such as language and learning support (see Clegg et al. 2006 for further discussion of help seeking behaviour), but they stressed the need for on-going input to manage university demands and expectations. The uncertainty extended beyond the structures of university life to the demands of study. Students expressed surprise at the reading demands of Arts units and also some confusion about how 'hard and fast' these requirements were.

And I find the biggest challenge is getting through adequate enough reading, because I find there's ... copious amounts of reading, I think that's the biggest challenge, is keeping up with the reading. Not so much the workload, but the reading so that you've got a good understanding and not just a basic understanding of what's going on.

I find you can generally keep up with all the readings as long as you only read the prescribed text or the study guide, not the ones that they list as essential reading; they've got six to 12 other books and you have to read a chapter from all them. I think that's crazy, to read that amount of literature if you're not going to use it in an assignment or anything is, I think, a total waste of time because it goes in one ear and out the other basically.

They identified implicit conventions about reading load which shaped their study habits, even though 32 of these students felt they should commit more time to study than they currently were.

We were talking about it the other day in a focus group. Sometimes with many lecturers or tutorials there is this *unspoken agreement* that 'we know that some of you are [doing the reading] and we also know that a lot of you aren't for whatever reason and we won't even talk about it' (*our emphasis*).

Turnbull et al. (2006) found that first year students experienced significant degrees of confusion about workloads, drafts and the return of work, but students at all year levels in our study revealed that there was confusion and conflicting assumptions about these issues. This was particularly apparent when students talked about assessment.

With the big essay that I've got to do, it's just seems that it's been assumed that we all know how to write a first year university essay. ... It's just daunting because ... we just weren't given verbal instruction. They just said 'There's all these resources, just go and check it all out.' So there are pages and pages of information on how to write this specific psychology essay.

In every single subject [it] was all 'Okay, you have to get the referencing right because if you don't get it right you can get kicked out of Monash. It's plagiarism'. You just kind of sit there and go, 'Oh crap', but then I downloaded the referencing bit of the key manual to get the style of referencing and it was still wrong. Then they wouldn't actually tell me what was wrong with my referencing.

Overall, students indicated that they often struggled to maintain a clear sense of what was required to succeed in university life.

Academic resources and assessment

James (2001) describes a perception that contemporary students are demanding teaching that feeds directly into concrete outcomes; that they are focused on 'narrowly reproductive approaches to assessment'

(James 2001, p. 2). Yet, the students who participated revealed relatively sophisticated understandings of the different tasks that were involved in effective learning. Study skills classes, for example, while 'boring', were recognised as useful.

Last year, we actually had compulsory library lessons so you would go in there and you would learn how to use the university library because obviously most of us are coming straight out of high school, you had no idea and it was a completely different system. And we found that, as boring as it was, the first time you went up there by yourself you knew exactly what to do, you knew where to find things.

I mean, they always offer like essay writing classes and things like that but I [would like] actual time management classes and make it compulsory for every first year. I mean, it probably would have saved me heaps of trouble if I'd learned that.

End of term assessments provoked the expected reactions around conflicting deadlines, but there was significant insight into why these conflicts were necessary. Students understood that Arts units would always require larger assessments close to end of semester because knowledge has to be built.

Even though it might be easy to have things earlier, I would still say that from a learning perspective I wouldn't be ready to do it much earlier anyway. So it's going to be a constant clash that you have to build up your learning before you actually do too many large assessment tasks.

It ... makes sense because you've got to get somewhere into the subject to be able to do the subject. Then again you don't expect to get three essays at the same time and you really want to go through them one by one.

This recognition didn't avoid the frustration generated by clashing deadlines.

It's frustrating though when all the assignments come within a week, a week, a week of each other, all the due dates. I mean it's unfair for us to say to the lecturers 'Well, why can't you all work it out together?' but ... I think the most difficult time this semester is in the last, in the second half because in the first half you might have 1 assignment and in some subjects you hardly get anything. Then in the second half it all gets blocked together and you're overloaded with all this stuff plus trying to study for exams as well.

I find balancing little projects with big projects tricky because I've got one massive essay and then I've got a whole heap of little things that keep

coming up. And so I focus on the little things and the essay just doesn't get started, and I just don't know how you balance the big and the little stuff.

There was recognition of the different learning outcomes of larger more independent pieces of assessment and smaller more targeted assessments.

I think in first year it is quite good to get an overview but in the later years it is much more satisfying to me to do [big projects]. One of my subjects now is a double point and it is just one project for the whole semester and I just love it. I can really sink my teeth into it.

Students reflected on the ways in which their time schedules shaped their learning experiences. The fragmented time schedules necessitated by study schedules, work and other life pressures led some to prefer the last minute attack on a piece of assessment. They saw this as a good way to generate coherent insights about a topic.

Personally I [like] doing it on one day. I know it sounds stupid but I find it easier to get it done in one block as opposed to a few weeks. You're less motivated to go back to it.

Your train of thought [is affected] as well; you may have a good idea and you got to leave it and come back and then you can't remember it. It's not doing you any favours either by leaving it late but sometimes it's the only way to get it done.

This issue of conflicting schedules and tight timelines had particular impacts when group assignments, which are vital to learning and developing teamwork skills, were part of the assessment. They presented real time management problems, due to the number of schedules that needed to be accommodated.

If there's a group assignment, time management is really hard. Even today I've got a group assignment due today and I'm having problems with one person in the group because she was away. Then she was sick and she only told us yesterday so we have to do everything today. I reckon group assignments can be really draining and hard.

These findings reveal these students have considerable insight into different forms of knowledge acquisition. They make some conscious decisions about how to maximise their own learning outcomes with the time available.

I think that one of the most important things to do as far as study goes is to get rid of the periphery, get rid of the rubbish. ... Every week ask 'what is it that they're trying to say to you? What is the most impor-

tant thing?' Get rid of the rubbish. There's so much. You could go and read for a million years and never find out what they are actually asking you. To me, it is the most important thing every week; ... what is the core of what they're trying to say to us every week?

Many priorities

As expected, students revealed multiple life priorities. Study and academic success were important, but many other activities were vital too. Financial pressures were a significant aspect of participation in university life for all students, which meant they showed strong commitment to paid work. Only six of this student cohort had no paid work. Twenty six students worked more than 15 hours each week with sixteen working more than 20 hours. For most students, the dual commitments to work and study couldn't easily be separated. Paid work was vital to supporting study. The level of debt students were incurring was a big factor in this equation. Overall, it has been found that Australian undergraduate students are facing increased financial pressure in recent years (Long & Hayden, 2000; James et al., 2007). This was a critical part of student decision-making around work and was reflected in tensions around the cost of study and time for work.

I can only work 20 hours per week so finding a way to earn enough money to support myself, come up with my tuition fees and have good grades at the same time [is hard] but I have been able to do it.

So it's hard to prioritise things because if someone calls you up and goes 'listen I'm sick' or 'I've got something on, can you do this shift for me?', you just think that it's extra money. So you go and do it.

Students described strong commitment to achieving degrees but they viewed their employment as critical to completing study, so employers' expectations played an important role in their decisions. Fourteen students reported pressure from employers to do more paid work, but many others talked of feeling responsible to employers and in their jobs.

You've got responsibilities too because if you're working you're responsible to your boss, you've got to show up for them. ... If you're studying, you're only responsible to yourself and the money that you've put into your course which you might not think about after you've signed your HECS debt or whatever.

Most part-time employers are going to want you for 25 hours a week and that's ... a minimum really.

You sign a contract and you say you're going to put work ahead of everything, like your other commitments ... and so when you say, 'No, I'm going to be more committed to my school work', [you] feel guilty because it's not what [you] agreed to.

Some students were pursuing study whilst working as part of their professional development, which intensified negotiation of these intersecting commitments.

I do about 10 to 15 hours paid work a week but I also do work for music groups ... that's unpaid at the moment and that takes up another four or five hours a week. I tend to find because I've got responsibilities to other people, I put that first over doing my assignments and I'll leave that to the last minute. My past two or three essays, the due dates have been one week after another and I'll finish one and then I'll start the next one the week beforehand. It's ... putting work first because I've got direct responsibilities that I get paid for.

For students required to undertake placements, the additional financial pressures were extremely difficult to negotiate. The loss of pay consequent upon extended periods of absence from employment meant that many students really struggled to complete degree requirements. Despite the importance of paid work, students showed significant commitment to study, even when they knew they could experience disadvantage as a result.

Actually I had to turn around and ring them up and say, 'Sorry, it's not going to happen today. I know we're on deadline and I'm sorry. My commitment is to my school work and I'm going to have to give this away'. Unfortunately, it's another reason I think they've gone and turned around and hired someone else altogether, so it's just one of those things.

Although focused on the financial pressures of attending university, students revealed considerable commitment to learning as a journey as well as a means to an end. In this sense, students struggle with the same conflicts and challenges as academic staff seeking pedagogy that is transformative while negotiating more immediate goals and constraints.

I don't think this is a Monash thing... it's really a western philosophy thing but I find that university is very goal orientated and it tends to emphasise what is coming at the end rather than the

whole journey of study. And I think that hinders the process of study. ... My perception is that it is about the whole journey of study not the end except the end – the degree is not relevant if you haven't learnt.

I think that what has helped me the most at Uni even more than what I have learnt from my degree has been ... the life skills I've learnt..., the juggling I've gone through. And that has [made me] actually grow a lot more than my degree itself.

These students are negotiating complex life demands in the management and balancing of finances, paid work and study. This is common across the sector in Australia (McInnis & Hartley 2002). While James (2001) suggests that many university staff feel pessimistic about changing student expectations, based on perceptions of divided focus and instrumentalist approaches to learning, these students revealed significant commitment to learning and to study that was not simply driven by concerns of employability.

They balanced this commitment with a sense of responsibility to their employers and their work as well. Rather than experiencing their paid work as a conflicting requirement (although they clearly acknowledged the conflicts in managing both commitments simul-

taneously), it is possible to argue these students saw paid work and study as mutually reinforcing activities, focused on longer term life outcomes.

Families and care

Family responsibilities played a significant role not only for students who were primary carers but for all students. While thirty six of the students indicated they had no direct dependants, thirty three of these students lived with their parents or in a shared house and had care responsibilities in this context. All students described an on-going negotiation between relationships with families and other key priorities of work and study as part of their daily life.

I have to take my sister to school every morning, so it's a 7.30 start for me whether I like it or not. So I get up, take my sister to school and then it's either off to uni or off to work, whatever it is. I try

The sophistication these students were able to bring to thinking about their learning suggested that higher education institutions and academic staff within them might well take the risk of talking more fully about learning and the experiences of learning with their students...

to kill two birds with one stone [and] ... so I go to a friend's house and study. ... I'll study in the dining room and they can study up on the roof and that, to me, is socialising.

I get landed with the responsibilities; if someone has to stay at home with my little sister, it's usually me. And I end up doing a lot of the chores around the home because mum's working longer hours now, and she's taken to catching the train to work so that gets a bit complicated. She's stressing and trying to juggle finances.

With my family, it's a bit of a guilt trip type thing. They live a couple of hours away and so I'm expected to go home and see them on weekends and it's a few hours drive and I can't do anything over the weekend and I can't study or anything and if I haven't seen them for a few weekends so I go home... It's ... hard to juggle staying here and needing to stay here and them wanting to see me and wanting to go home.

For me the obvious one is the fact that I have kids, I have a house, I have a husband. All of those things: having to have someone take care of the kids, the cost of child care and all of that everyone knows about. They are the really big ones.

Of course, families were identified as key supports for students.

Leading up to exams, I am really anxious about not having enough time to study. I feel okay about all the other assessments that I've done but this leading up to the exam period I would love to be able to take some time off work but it's not going to be possible. [Then] my husband kick[s] in and say[s]; 'if you want a couple of days away from the kids I'll take off work so that you can go off and study'.

Conclusions

Analysis of contemporary student intakes, patterns of study and tertiary pathways in Australia reveal that previous expectations about school-university-work transitions no longer provide useful maps for university student experience. The ratio of direct entry students has changed (Clerehan 2002; McInnis, 2004), combinations of study and paid work have changed (Bradley 2006), and students manage a range of potentially conflicting pressures on time and other resources. In this study, hypotheses about complex patterns of study, work and care were certainly confirmed; students were managing many competing priorities as they participate in university life.

Yet as James (2001) argues, 'students' preferences, expectations and needs have always been intricately interwoven' (2001, p. 9) in university life and experience, and these changes need not be understood as diminishing the learning compact between academic staff and students, or changing the teaching exchange in negative ways. Roettger et al. (2007) argue that student needs should drive the learning experience.

Massingham and Herrington (2006) explore declining attendance at university classes and suggest that movement towards a collaborative learning relationship may reinvigorate attendance and benefit graduates by further deepening their learning. These students revealed strong commitment to, and demonstrated insight into, forms of learning beyond the narrow outcomes of a degree and marketability. They were able to engage with multiple financial, social and employment obligations as they completed their studies; and to see paid work as a necessary integrated aspect of continuing their studies rather than in opposition to study or as a distraction from it. They demonstrated very good understanding of the pressures on academic staff and focused more on communication of expectations than on criticizing academic staff. While approaching many aspects of their study/work/life juggle pragmatically, students revealed a desire for deep learning, recognising the other insights and skills that are provided by an intense immersion in one specific topic or activity.

Clegg et al. suggest that 'we should value the resourcefulness of students in coping with the demands on them' (2006, p. 102). McInnis (2004) suggests that we may need to imagine student life more creatively in order to respond to the needs of contemporary students. Academics and administrative staff face considerable challenges due to new and intensifying productivity expectations, and new forms of accountability and reporting. These factors shape institutions, curricula and classroom interactions for students and staff. These students faced a similar landscape of competing responsibilities and commitments.

Yet, the desire for meaningful learning experiences was central to the choices these students made. The sophistication these students were able to bring to thinking about their learning suggested that higher education institutions and academic staff within them might well take the risk of talking more fully about learning and the experiences of learning with their students, of communicating much more explicitly rationales for learning activities, and the limitations inherent in any learning environment.

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