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Critical perspectives: Students' expectations of difficulties they may face in undertaking their degree

Carmela Briguglio

Curtin University of Technology, Perth, Western Australia
carmela.briguglio@cbs.curtin.edu.au

Julie Howe

Curtin University of Technology, Perth, Western Australia
julie.howe@cbs.curtin.edu.au

Abstract: This paper examines students' concerns about completing tertiary studies in an Australian context. Qualitative data were collated from a short writing task undertaken by a group of undergraduate students in the Curtin Business School for the purpose of diagnosing students' writing skills. The task required students to discuss challenges they expected to face in the course of their studies. The data indicated that although both local and international students have some common concerns, there are subtle differences in what this means for the different sub-groups. The concerns of international students, in particular, support previous research in the field, and indicate that they have realistic expectations of the challenges they will face. Nevertheless, many students reveal a positive approach to facing any future challenges and a strong desire to apply themselves fully and to be successful. Unlike much existing research in this field, which has tended to be based on data gathered from students either during their degree studies or at the end of their first year, the data for this paper were obtained at the beginning of the first year.

Keywords: student perspectives, international students, first year experience

Introduction

Australian researchers have for some years now examined the experience of first year undergraduates from a variety of perspectives, dating back to the seminal work *First year on campus* by McInnis and James (1995) and, more recently, the DEST sponsored study *The first year experience in Australian universities: findings from a decade of national studies* (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005), which provides a wealth of information on what has been learned over the last ten years or so. In regard to international students, the field has perhaps been even more prolific, with a wealth of studies on a variety of aspects related to the education of international students, including: marketing-related pre-arrival studies, diagnosing the aspirations and expectations of students, and post-completion studies, evaluating the levels of satisfaction of students as 'customers' (McInnis, 2004); studies examining linguistic and cultural issues faced by international (particularly English as a second language) students (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991 & 1997; Volet, 1999; Volet & Ang, 1998; Reid, Kirkpatrick & Mulligan, 1998; Mulligan & Kirkpatrick, 2000; Briguglio, 2000; Smart, Volet & Ang, 2000); and more broadly, studies placing the education of international students in a wider context of internationalisation of curriculum for all students (Leask, 1999; Ramburuth, 2001; Liddicoat, Eisenchelas & Trevaskes, 2003; Briguglio, 2004; Asmar, 2005)

Unlike much existing research based on student feedback, which has tended to be gathered from students either during their degree studies, at the end of their first year or at the end of their degree, the data for this paper were obtained at the beginning of the first year or, in the

case of offshore students, from those students transferring to their first semester of study on an Australian campus. In this sense we are very much examining students' expectations and perceptions at a very early stage (week one of semester). The paper is based on qualitative data, using the words and perceptions of students themselves to describe their needs, anxieties and concerns. The ethnographic approach in this sort of analysis does not easily allow for quantification of student responses. The aim is rather to build up a picture from the students' perspective, where they become 'actors' in, rather than 'recipients', of the tertiary experience. The criticalist position taken by the two authors reflects their role as academic advisers, who deal almost daily with the expressed needs and concerns of students and who have an advocacy role in regard to implications for practice.

The context and method for this study

In 2003, staff from Curtin Business School's (CBS) Communication Skills Centre, worked with colleagues from the CBS School of Information Systems to develop a diagnostic task to assess the academic writing skills of students taking the first year unit, Information Systems 100. The aim was to gain concrete data about beginning students' writing skills for the purpose of diagnosing the level of support that might be required (Briguglio, 2005a). The diagnostic task was further refined in 2004 and 2005 and given to students studying other first year core units for the Bachelor of Commerce degree. The earlier cohorts who undertook the task numbered between 532 and 670.

The diagnostic task

The diagnostic task, for which some 30 - 40 minutes was allowed, required students to write at least half a page on one of three topics about their expectations of study. This paper focuses on students' responses to just one of the questions in the diagnostic task: "*What difficulties might you face in undertaking your degree at Curtin?*" Almost 50% (84 students) of those who completed the task opted to answer this topic. Students were informed of the purpose of the task through briefings during orientation week and a letter given to each student upon enrolment. They were reassured about the diagnostic nature of the task and that absolute confidentiality would apply. They were also informed that they could obtain their individual results upon request.

The cohort for this study

Students from the mid-year intake into the Bachelor of Commerce at CBS undertook the writing task in the first week of Semester 2, 2005. Unlike earlier cohorts, which contained students for a specific core unit, this cohort included first year (beginning) students enrolled in a variety of units and students coming to the Perth campus from an offshore program into the second or third year of their degree. The sample contains male and female Australian students (including some from a non-English speaking background), international students, mature age and external students and part-time and full-time students. For the purposes of this paper, we have labelled our quotations as coming from either 'local' or 'international' students. This paper is based on an analysis of 84 student 'texts', 39 from local students (25 females and 14 males) and 45 from international students (31 females and 14 males). Thus overall, 56 responses were from females and 28 from males.

The focus of our analysis

Not surprisingly, different issues emerged for different sub-groups in this fairly diverse student sample, although there were some issues in common. However, even where there were common concerns, such as not being fully versed in the academic conventions of university, there are subtle differences in what this means for the different sub-groups. We

examine these differences in an attempt to highlight issues which are sometimes glossed over or not understood, particularly in relation to the education of international students on Australian university campuses. Since this is a qualitative study, the words of students themselves are quoted freely as they provide a very powerful image of student perceptions and feelings about embarking on the journey of obtaining a degree.

Findings and discussion

The data obtained from an analysis of the student texts seem to support earlier studies describing the difficulties experienced particularly by undergraduate students in the course of obtaining their degree. This would seem to indicate that students are quite aware and realistic about the challenges they face. Moreover, we found that students were already thinking about how they might tackle potential problems in order to ensure success in their studies and that they expressed quite consistently a determination to succeed.

Within the total cohort, major issues identified as potential difficulties included the following: unfamiliarity with academic conventions; anticipated workload; time management issues; financial considerations; and awareness of the need to be disciplined.

Among international students, as may be expected, the primary concern related to English language issues, with problems associated with studying in a different culture a close second. Other concerns of international students included: lack of knowledge about the new learning environment/context; fear about speaking out in class; not understanding the spoken language of teachers and/or local students; having to work in multinational student teams; and lacking the social support networks of home.

General concerns expressed by students

Within the whole cohort, concerns about lack of knowledge of academic conventions included worries about writing skills, in particular. Others felt that they needed to learn how to write assignments since it had been some years since they had last studied. One local student expressed it thus:

It has been twenty years since I have studied and I would be lying if I didn't admit that I am a little concerned over my abilities (or lack of) in completing assignments. I am hoping that I can rely on the tutor to provide me with some direction, because I feel like an absolute novice. (Local female, part-time)

While international students also expressed anxiety about unfamiliarity with academic conventions, their concerns are much broader and reflect having to face a whole different way of learning. International students anticipated the “different education system”, the “different methods of assessment”, the “different academic atmosphere” or “different learning methods”:

The way of studying here is largely different, compared with my country. Knowledge taught here is more practical, and innovation is highly encouraged here. Most of the time, no answer given is absolutely right, while students' own ideas are more important. (International female, f/t)

Another student adds:

The education system is very different here compared to Malaysia. We are expected to be more independent and to be more up-front in every aspect of the units we are doing. (International female, f/t)

Many students expressed concern at the anticipated workload and at having to manage their time in order to successfully balance a range of other commitments besides study. Financial concerns came up as a related issue, with students expressing concern that, whilst money was necessary, earning it through work should not prevent them studying. The longitudinal study by Krause et al. (2005) indicates that there is an increasing rise in the proportion of students committed to paid employment (from 47% in 1994 to 55% in 2004). The most vivid descriptions in this area came, not surprisingly, from mothers who had to juggle parental duties, work commitments and study.

While undergraduate international students may not have the same family commitments, they too face problems of time management. However, in their case, the reasons are different from those of local students. Several mentioned that they will require much time to cover required reading and assignments, with some recording lectures and listening to them at home:

I need to spend more time on my study compared with other classmates. For example, checking new words from the dictionary, reading text books and proof-reading my individual assignments. (International female, f/t)

Both local and international students seemed aware that because of workload and time management issues, they would need to be disciplined to succeed in their studies. A study by McInnis (2001) also indicates that too high a level of external commitments may be the cause of students' disengagement with the undergraduate experience, leading to a poorer experience overall. Recent moves by Oxford University to ensure that students attend the required number of lectures and tutorials might seem to be addressing just this issue (The Guardian, 2006).

The need to be disciplined was expressed in a number of ways. For example some local students were concerned about how to balance their social lives with study and wondered if they would be led astray by their peers. International students, on the other hand, were concerned about coping with independent study and keeping themselves motivated:

In studying for tests without an established support group I will have to rely on greater self-discipline and will lack the discussion or value-added knowledge that is brought to the table by others. (International male, f/t)

Working in groups also came up as a potential difficulty among both local and international students and both foresee that it may pose problems. One local student expresses it thus:

Another difficulty that I could face when it comes to my degree is the ability to work well with my fellow students. I feel this is an important aspect when it comes to my studies at Curtin. [...] Barriers such as language and different backgrounds need to be overcome to successfully participate in any group work. (Local female f/t)

An international student expresses similar concerns:

Being an Asian is quite difficult here even though there are many Asians from Malaysia [...]. I have the feeling the local students are more comfortable with their own groups as such. To get to know them with a deep understanding is not easy as we might miscommunicate in the process. (International female, f/t)

This is an area that continues to require attention in Australian universities, for while group work or 'group assignments' represent a fairly common form of assessment in university courses and present an opportunity for maximising intercultural learning, this possibility is not being fully exploited (Volet & Ang, 1998; De Vita, 2002; Briguglio, 2005b; Crosling & Martin, 2005).

Concerns of international students

English language issues, studying in a different culture, unfamiliarity with academic conventions and the local context and the absence of support networks were among the major issues that international students foresaw. Such concerns have been well-documented in previous studies of the experiences of international students, and indicate that these students have very realistic expectations of the difficulties they will face. More recent studies (Hellsten, 2002; Krause, 2003; Asmar, 2005) indicate that in spite of the growth in support services for international students, things have not necessarily improved. Krause et al (2005) report that, on a number of measures, international students indicate experiencing higher levels of stress during their first year on an Australian campus than their local counterparts. For example, greater percentages of international students are likely to: have difficulty comprehending course material; report discomfort in participating in class discussions; and find the workload too heavy. On the other hand, fewer international students are likely to: find orientation programs useful; report that they feel part of a group committed to learning; and experience a sense of belonging (Krause et al, 2005, p.76).

In regard to English language issues, since students in our study were in their first week of semester, it is understandable that they focussed on listening and speaking skills, rather than written English, since at this point writing requirements would be minimal. The fact that students have just arrived also caused some to express problems understanding the Australian accent:

Lecturers usually speak very fast, some of which might use slang words or speak with a heavy accent. (International male, f/t)

Unfortunately, listening and speaking skills tend to receive much less attention in tertiary contexts (Mulligan & Kirkpatrick, 2000; Dooey, 2006). Students do, however, indicate that they are realistic about the difficulties that this will pose for at least some of them:

Teaching staff in Curtin come from all around the world, so I will hear various accents during class. Let's make a comparison. If I have 100 percent energy, I have to pay 60% of my energy to understand what the teacher said but not the solutions of my teachers' questions (International male, f/t)

Students also are quick to understand that they will need to speak up in class in order to obtain good grades:

Tutorials may be a big problem for me as participation is crucial. In order to get high marks, I would be struggling to be involved in class, whereas local students are likely to dominate most of the time. (International female, f/t)

Many students also displayed an understanding that cultural differences bring different ways of doing things and that this will affect all aspects of their university life:

I must learn to be more open and respect other people's cultures and beliefs. [...]

I am sure that I will take some time to adapt to the university academic system here.
(International female, f/t)

Another student expressed it more poignantly, illustrating how strongly some students feel the pressure of being away from home:

In conclusion, the difficulties come from my French nationality. My first language is French, I have another culture and my family live far away from me. (International male, f/t)

The tenor of responses from international students shows that, in spite of any perceived or anticipated difficulties, they are already thinking of ways to overcome them and are optimistic and determined to succeed. The following comment is fairly typical of this attitude:

To live in such a multi-cultural environment is a chance, as well as a challenge. Communication with people from different backgrounds and with heavy accent is always a problem for international students like me, especially in the beginning. Fortunately, people here are really friendly and helpful, so I am confident to figure it out soon. (International female, f/t)

According to Burton & Dowling (2005) self-efficacy, which “reflects a student’s optimistic belief in their ability to cope with stress in a variety of challenging situations” (p. 73) is related to academic success. It remains to be seen, however, whether these originally high levels of self-efficacy endure.

Implications for practice and conclusion

In conclusion, the need to be disciplined and the need for time management (including balancing the demands of work, family and social commitments with study) and monetary issues were the concerns most cited by local students. While international students agreed that time management would be an issue for them (though for different reasons), they more often expressed the difficulties of studying in English (for many a second language), of becoming familiar with the academic study conventions and the local context and culture, of having to cope without their usual support networks, and of ensuring success in their studies.

The analysis of these student texts indicates that students, particularly international students, are not unaware of the problems and challenges they will face. Indeed, the issues students identified are similar to those espoused in some first year experience literature (McInnis & James, 1995; Smart et al., 2000; Hellsten 2002; Liddicoat et al, 2003; Krause et al., 2005). What is most impressive, however, is the level of optimism and determination displayed by both local and international students. We aim to broaden this study by repeating this exercise at the end of the first year, to ascertain to what extent such optimism is maintained.

Meanwhile, the findings would seem to highlight the need for early intervention and support strategies to assist new tertiary students in achieving their goals. While such strategies are already being implemented in many Australian universities, we have no clear idea of the extent or effectiveness of the support provided. There is also much room for further research in this area.

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