

Should I Stay or Should I Go? Why Do Students Consider Leaving Tertiary Study and What Factors Do Students Identify as Barriers to Success?

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Abstract: “Should I stay or should I go”, a song by The Clash (1982), sums up the dilemma many students face when they begin their journey in tertiary study. This article presents a case study research project which examined the experiences of first-year students on a bachelor’s degree programme and specifically looks at why some students consider withdrawing and factors that students identify as barriers to their success. Retention and success continues to be an issue for tertiary institutions, especially in the first year when attrition and non-completion is at its highest (Crosling, Heagney & Thomas, 2009; Zepke, Leach & Prebble, 2006). Today’s student body is diverse and unlike “traditional” students, today’s students have many personal issues that can be barriers to success. Adding to this is the considerable pressure academic staff are under to support students both academically and pastorally despite tightening fiscal constraints. It is argued that further discussion is needed on the implications of these barriers.

Key words: tertiary education; student retention and success; student withdrawal; student attrition and non-completion; pastoral care; first-year higher education; barriers to success

Introduction

“Should I stay or should I go now? If I go there will be trouble, and if I stay it will be double” (The Clash, 1982). These lyrics are pertinent to the dilemmas many first-year students face in tertiary education. Students enter university, polytechnic or other tertiary institutions full of hopes and dreams of a better future. They expect to increase their knowledge and skills in order to become gainfully employed and to improve their lives and the lives of their families. They come with the intention of being successful and do not intend to fail, and yet a significant proportion face issues which make them ask “Should I stay or should I go?”

The commitment to study is a considerable one, and the first year of tertiary study can be extremely challenging, especially since the widening of access to and participation in tertiary education (Leathwood, & O’Connell, 2003). Today many students not only face a new academic culture but also have to deal with family and work commitments, financial pressures and differences in language and culture (Kinnear, Sparrow, Boyce & Middleton, 2008). These pressures have implications for pastoral care during the course of study.

Retention and Success in the New Zealand Context

Western world governments are requiring increased accountability in tertiary education in return for funding (Zepke et al., 2006), with the emphasis on retention and success (Zepke et al., 2005). The New Zealand Government spent approximately \$5.4 billion in 2009/10 on tertiary education (Ministry of Education, 2011a), which was approximately 1.7% of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) (Ministry of Education, 2011b). This is similar to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average of 1.2% when the expenditure for student loans, scholarships and grants are deducted (Ministry of Education 2011b). According to Scott and Gini (2010), New Zealand spent nearly double the OECD average on financial aid (such as loans) to tertiary students. With this huge investment there is growing pressure to ensure a healthy return.

The New Zealand Government's focus for this return is evident in their *Tertiary Education Strategy 2010–2015* (Ministry of Education, 2009) which describes the expectations for tertiary providers, using key words such as “relevant”, “efficient” and “effective”. These terms are used repetitively throughout the document and highlight the importance of getting the best return for public money. “A key driver to improve the efficiency of public investment in tertiary education is to improve course and qualification completion rates” (Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 10) and the New Zealand Government “expect[s] to see better course and qualification completion and progression rates for students as a result of higher-quality teaching and learning, and more effective and culturally responsive pastoral care” (p. 13). However, the question needs to be raised: What is culturally responsive pastoral care? Nowhere does the Ministry of Education explain what this means, what it looks like in practice, and how this can be done in a tight fiscal climate.

Tertiary institutions have a responsibility to provide quality teaching and learning and are expected to produce students who are equipped with the skills, knowledge and qualifications that are considered valuable to society (Scott & Smart, 2005). Failing to produce such students damages the institution's reputation and can have financial consequences. Resources put in place to recruit and enrol students are wasted when students withdraw (Yorke & Longden, 2004).

Benefits of Retention and Success

There are many benefits that come with students staying and completing their courses of study beyond simply the financial. Not only is course completion cost effective, it is good for both the economy and society in general. It is well recognised that to succeed globally, countries must have a well-educated and highly qualified workforce (Ma & Frempong, 2008). In New Zealand, tertiary education is seen as a way of equipping students “for a life in a knowledge economy” (Ministry of Education, 2011a, p. 1). It is important for a growing economy, an “economy that delivers greater prosperity, security and opportunity for all” (Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 8).

Clearly students who complete their courses are more employable and able to contribute to the economy, but Yorke and Thomas (2003) suggest that there are many more personal and societal benefits, including “promoting citizenship and social cohesion” (p. 64) and students who succeed see themselves as healthy and less likely to suffer depression. “The research even suggests that graduates are more inclined to be actively involved in community and voluntary groups, tend to have more egalitarian and anti-racist attitudes, and to have greater faith in the political process” (Institute of Education, 2001, as cited in Yorke & Thomas, 2003, p. 64). Furthermore “education

is the great equalizer” (Seidman, 2005, p. xi) and can address issues of social justice (Rhodes & Nevill, 2004; Yorke & Longden, 2004). For students to be economically self-sufficient and cope with the increasingly complex issues they face today, some form of tertiary education is needed (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006).

Student Diversity

Widening access and increasing participation has seen a change in who the “student” is. The student is no longer a white middle-class male who has no disabilities, no money worries and no domestic responsibilities (Leathwood & O’Connell, 2003) – today’s students are diverse and may come from low socio-economic backgrounds, have disabilities, be mature students, come from minority ethnic groups and may not have gained qualifications from school (Leathwood & O’Connell, 2003). These students from diverse backgrounds are often referred to as “non-traditional”, “other” or “minority” students despite the fact that they now make up the majority of the student body.

This diverse group of students differ from the “traditional” student and can have many more pressures facing them that can be barriers to success. They may have family responsibilities, financial pressures, work commitments, and may be facing cultural and language differences (Kinnear, Sparrow, Boyce, & Middleton, 2008). These complex issues that students face have been identified as factors in student failure (Horstmanshof & Zimitat, 2007). Thomas (2002) suggests that accessing tertiary education for these students is more of a struggle than a right and recommends investigating ways to support them to succeed. The case study discussed below attempts to understand the struggles individuals face and the implications for institutions and their academic staff.

Method

This article draws on data collected as part of the requirement for a Master’s of Education from Unitec Institute of Technology. A qualitative single case study was conducted which examined the experiences of one cohort of students in a field-based early childhood education bachelor’s-degree programme at an Auckland tertiary institution. Data was collected and analysed from a questionnaire and two focus groups. Nineteen students completed the questionnaire, with seven volunteering and taking part in a student focus group. Four academic staff who had taught the cohort of students in their first semester were also involved in a focus group. In both the questionnaire and the focus groups, participants were asked about student experiences in their first semester. One of the key questions significant to the research was: What factors do students identify as barriers to being successful in their first semester? Each focus group lasted around 60 minutes, and was recorded and transcribed. This data, along with the data collected from the questionnaires, was analysed by using memos and coding into themes.

Participants.

The student participants involved in this research (i.e. those students who completed the questionnaires) were diverse in background, with 42% between the ages of 18 and 25, 26% between 25 and 39; and 32% 40 years or older. The majority were women, although two males also took part. Thirty-seven per cent identified themselves as Asian, 31.5% as New Zealand/European, 16% as Pasifika, 10.5% New Zealand Māori, and 5% Australian.¹ Almost

¹ Percentages have been rounded to the nearest 0.5%.

half (47%) of the student participants had English as a second language and almost half (47%) were the first in their family to enrol in a bachelor's degree.

Results

The focus of this article is on the data regarding the barriers students faced and what made some students consider withdrawing. The data came from one cohort of students who were in their second year, but who shared their experiences of their first semester in a bachelor's degree. None of the student participants in this research had withdrawn, although seven (37%) said they had considered withdrawing. Finding out why students do not complete their studies is problematic since many students who withdraw are difficult to contact. Instead this case study investigated the experiences of students who continued on in their studies despite other students withdrawing.

The reasons the student participants considering withdrawing were:

- family commitments, lack of computer skills, and lack of finance
- time constraints – unable to cope with job, children and assignment (note: this student was working 40 hours and volunteering in a centre for eight hours and had dependants he/she was responsible for)
- other career options, like moving overseas
- busy at work, not enough time for assignments
- thoughts going through my mind on whether or not I would be a good early childhood teacher
- physically too tired working in the centre-volunteer position and caring for two children as a single parent, and
- failing to pass assignments.

This is despite 95% of the student participants saying they felt confident coming into the degree. Students were asked if they agreed with the statement “I felt academically prepared before coming onto the programme”. Fifty-eight per cent strongly agreed or agreed with this statement while 31.5% neither agreed nor disagreed and only 10.5% felt they were not prepared academically. Yet despite feeling confident and academically prepared, some still considered withdrawing.

Closer examination of the data from the questionnaire revealed that six student participants (35% of those who answered the question) said they were the main caregiver for a dependant. This dependant could be a child or children, a sick relative, a person with a disability, or an elderly family member. And one person ticked “Yes” for having a disability, impairment, or long-term medical condition that affected their studies.

The students were also asked in the questionnaire to provide details regarding their work hours. On average, students worked 12 hours a week over and above their full-time study (i.e. class time and practicum hours). Three students did the minimum eight volunteer hours in a centre and did not work anywhere else while one student worked 48 hours per week. The three students who did the minimum required hours had no dependants or a disability and had never considered withdrawing from the programme. Nine students (47%) worked and/or volunteered for 20 hours or more a week, and three of these had dependants they were responsible for. Five (55%) of these students had considered withdrawing, compared with only two students (20%) from the

group who worked and/or volunteered less than 20 hours a week. It can be concluded that the more hours a student works, the more likely they are to consider withdrawing. Also worth noting is that seven (78%) of the nine students who worked for more than 20 hours said English was their second language.

Furthermore, more than half of the student participants said money concerns and family concerns made it difficult for them to study (58% and 53%, respectively). Another four students (21%) said they had health concerns that made it difficult for them to study.

When students were asked what had hindered them in their studies, the most frequently given reasons were:

- family commitments/stress (eight people, 42%)
- workload/lack of time (eight students, 42%)
- financial pressures (seven students, 37%)
- poor time management (five students, 26%)
- sickness (four students, 21%), and
- not understanding what to do/assignments (four students, 21%).

The majority of these responses were external to the institution and can be related to students' personal circumstances.

The findings from the questionnaire on the barriers to being successful were consistent with the findings from the student focus group. One participant noted, "During the first term of my course, my husband lost his job... Since then it has been a bit tough; I have been working forty hours a week." Another spoke of working weekends and the responsibility of being a mother: "Sometimes I feel too much going on, because there is no time for my assignments at all." She went on to say:

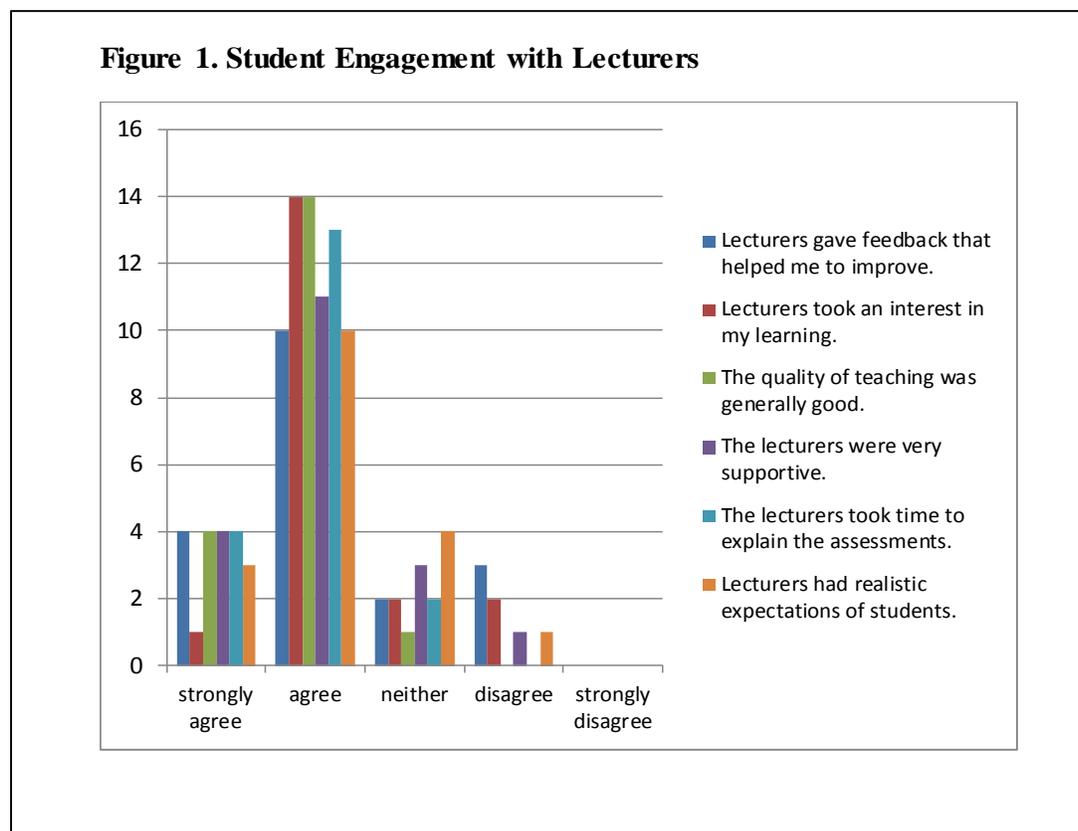
"I sit in the night-time and being a mother you have so many things in the house also to do. It's just not your work and just not your school. It's other housework also we have to do. So after I finish all those stuff I used to sit at ten o'clock, midnight, I have to spend with my assignments and I have done it. So it's, it's really a struggle for us you know, it's really a struggle."

Two other students shared how they had shingles in their first semester of study and how this impacted on their studies. One said, 'I got shingles ... and was just literally bedridden for four months. ...And I would just sleep all day and, so it was a barrier. It was a real, real, real struggle.'

The academic staff also raised their concerns that many of the barriers for students were external to the institution and some were serious and the students needed referrals to counselling. One academic staff member shared how she had felt unprepared "because I didn't realise quite how much that would require of me. And that's fine but, I didn't feel experienced enough to do that." Another academic staff member also noted the personal issues that students faced but questioned how much support the staff could offer, saying: "It's a challenge because how far do you go with pastoral care?"

“How often can a student not turn up to class and group work because of family stuff, etcetera? Or not come on the noho marae [overnight marae stay] because they have known it was going to happen and they have a little [child] and then at the last minute say, ‘I’ve got nobody to mind her.’ Where do we draw the line or whatever?”

This data is significant because it highlights the pressures students face in their personal lives that affect their efforts to be successful in their studies. Despite the personal issues the students faced, they were very happy with the teaching and support they received from their lecturers. Figure 1 shows that the majority (83%) of students felt the lecturers were helpful with assignments and feedback, supportive, interested, and provided good quality teaching. All but one of the student participants strongly agreed or agreed with the statement “The quality of teaching was generally good”, and that student ticked neither agree nor disagree.



Discussion

It is important to note that while the study sample is small and should not be generalised, the student participants who took part are diverse and diverse student bodies are now commonplace in tertiary institutions (Zepke et al., 2005). The *Tertiary Education Strategy 2010–15* acknowledges this, sharing its vision to meet the needs of the growing diverse student body by “provid[ing] New Zealanders of all backgrounds with opportunities to gain world-class skills and knowledge” (Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 6). Students’ lives these days are far more complex than those of students in the past, and it is not surprising that students withdraw or consider withdrawing.

In this small research project, personal circumstances made up the majority of the factors that hindered the students in their studies and these barriers were, on the whole, external to the institution. This finding is similar to those of Kinnear, Boyce, Sparrow, Middleton, and Cullity (2009) where the most frequent themes regarding why students considered withdrawing were “extrinsic to the university itself” (p. 29). Even so, this does not mean the institution should absolve itself of responsibility. On the contrary, the Ministry of Education (2009) calls for institutions to “be more responsive to the demands of both students and industry and to make better use of scarce resources” (p. 13), and states that they “expect to see better course and qualification completion and progression rates for students as a result of higher-quality teaching and learning, and more effective and culturally responsive pastoral care” (p. 13).

But what does “culturally responsive pastoral care” mean? Who delivers this care? And are academic staff equipped to meet this requirement? The Ministry of Education does not define culturally responsive pastoral care or explain how it could or should be implemented. With no guidance as to what it looks like in practice, it is up to the individual institutions to interpret the Ministry’s directive. It would be helpful for the Ministry to give some guidelines regarding effective culturally responsive pastoral care, while at the same time limit being prescriptive. Oxford University Press (2013) defines pastoral care in an educational context as “relating to or denoting a teacher’s responsibility for the general well-being of pupils or students.” The New Zealand Teachers Council (n.d.), in their resource for teachers, gives the following definition:

[Cultural responsiveness is] interacting ... to truly understand their reality; it means understanding the socio-political history and how it impacts on classroom life; it means challenging personal beliefs and actions; and, it means changing practices to engage all students in their learning and make the classroom a positive learning place for all students (p. 3).

My interpretation of what is culturally responsive pastoral care focuses on building relationships with the students, getting to know them, connecting with them in ways that validate and respect who they are, and being open to hearing their stories and their lived realities. I see this notion of connecting and sharing as an exchange of cultural capital.

Pastoral care in practical terms can mean checking in with the student and asking how they are going; ringing them when they are absent; providing a listening ear; and, when necessary, referring them to support services (for example, health and counselling, financial assistance services, a chaplain). More vulnerable students do not seek help from counselling services and referring such students to counselling services absolves academic staff of responsibility and is often impersonal (McChlery & Wilkie, 2009). This suggests that academic staff should take a more active role in supporting students pastorally. This is something that Benson, Hewitt, Devos, Crosling, and Heagney (2009) identified in their research – they found that students were more likely to contact academic staff than the institution’s support services. This research project has also identified that students prefer to talk with the academic staff. Benson et al. (2009) suggest that “students from diverse backgrounds will respond to a diverse range of styles and approaches” (p. 548) and to support this they recommend academic staff include in their responsibilities “support and advocacy, offering practical and emotional support and guiding students towards learning skills support and other university support services” (p. 548). This is a strategy I highly recommend. However, I suggest it should go further with the most pastorally minded and culturally responsive staff being responsible for the teaching of first-year students.

The first year of tertiary study is the most crucial time for students and if we want to reduce attrition and non-completion then we need to be employing the best academic staff we can for them.

In this research the findings showed that the academic staff provided support to students and, on the whole, the staff were approachable and created an environment where the students felt they belonged. Nevertheless, the responsibility of academic staff to provide pastoral care is problematic. As noted above in the Ministry of Education's (2009) *Tertiary Education Strategy 2010–15*, academic staff are expected to do more with less. The Ministry wants more effective and culturally responsive pastoral care but at the same time they want efficiency. This is an oxymoron: being effective and providing culturally responsive care cannot take place without building relationships with students and this takes time.

In a research project that investigated the pastoral care lecturers provided, Van Laar and Easton (1994) found that 94% of lecturers had met with one or more distressed students in one year, with an average of three per term. They go on to state that this increases when taking into account mature students. Van Laar and Easton (1994) said the lecturers commented on the resourcing, saying that “much more could, and probably should, be done by themselves and by the counselling services, but that sufficient time, money and resources were not always available to do the job properly” (p. 86). Despite this being written near on 20 years ago, the issue is still relevant, and perhaps even more so, today. Van Laar and Easton (1994) recommended more resources and lecturer training. This was something that was also raised by the academic staff focus group:

“I think maybe sometimes we almost need, I mean that’s one thing that I found as a beginning lecturer, I would like more PD, [professional development]...on actually how to be an effective pastoral carer.”

This then raises another question: It’s a challenge because how far do you go with pastoral care? Wilcox, Winn, and Fyvie-Gauld (2005) found that some teachers felt it was not their role to provide pastoral care or to be involved in the retention of students. They highlighted that this view was made worse by the time constraints and the conflicts they faced between their teaching and research roles. The conflict between teaching and research was not investigated in this research project, but what has been raised is that lecturers are unsure how much pastoral support to give, and feel inexperienced in providing this support.

Conclusion

The main barriers that the students shared in this research were external to the institution and were a combination of factors including financial concerns, family concerns and commitments, work commitments and workload. The reality is that for many students, tertiary study is only one part of their already complex lives and once they enrol they can face the dilemma of “should I stay or should I go?” For some students, these barriers can lead them to needing both academic and pastoral support from the academic staff. Identification of this need has raised questions regarding the level of support the academic staff can realistically give students. Academic staff are under increasing pressure to provide both academic and pastoral support while also undertaking research. At the same time, the Ministry of Education (2009) is calling for institutions to provide this pastoral care and quality teaching while also expecting them to work in a tighter fiscal environment. Are academic staff comfortable offering this support? What

effect is this extra expectation having on academic staff? How much support are academic staff providing and how much is enough/too much? These questions are all worthy of further investigation.

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