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Student Success

ISSN: 2205-0795

Volume 9, Issue 3, pp. 13-23

July 2018



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## Interpreting the first-year experience of a non-traditional student: A case study

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### Abstract\*

*This article concerns non-traditional students' involvement in Australian higher education. It aims to deepen understanding of enabling and constraining factors for this group's retention, through an in-depth case study of a non-traditional student's university experience. The study is underpinned by principles of phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography with data analysis involving an inductive coding process and a thematic analysis. Findings draw attention to the need to provide support for non-traditional university students in developing a sense of connectedness and resourcefulness. The study makes an original contribution to knowledge by challenging the assumption that western theories of psychology, which privilege an individualist perspective, adequately explain and predict behaviours of non-traditional students who are members of collective social systems. It emphasises the need for researchers and practitioners to adopt an interpretative stance that accommodates a collectivist perspective. Without this approach, student behaviours may be misinterpreted and their circumstances may be unfairly undervalued.*

\*This article was first presented at the 2018 STARS Conference in Auckland, New Zealand in July 2018 and was selected via the peer review process as one of the top-rated papers. The authors have kindly given their permission to have this article published in this special issue of the Journal and it has undergone a further review by the editors to confirm it aligns with the Journal's standards.

#### **Please cite this article as:**

Kearney, J., Stanley, G., & Blackberry, G. (2018). Interpreting the first-year experience of a non-traditional student: A case study. *Student Success*, 9(3). 13-23. doi: 10.5204/ssj.v9i3.463

This article has been peer reviewed and accepted for publication in *Student Success*. Please see the Editorial Policies under the 'About' section of the Journal website for further information.

**Student Success: A journal exploring the experiences of students in tertiary education**



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## Introduction

Student attrition remains an ongoing concern for the higher education sector in Australia (Wilson et al., 2016). An institution's failure to retain students has personal and financial implications for the students themselves, in addition to reputational and financial consequences for the university (Beer & Lawson, 2016; Harvey & Luckman, 2014; Maher & Macallister, 2013) and potentially costs for society at large. While most universities have prioritised student success strategies, retention rates have improved only marginally, and in some case, have worsened in individual institutions (Beer & Lawson, 2016). Various explanations for this situation include the suggestion that the Australian government's widening participation agenda has encouraged a shift from elite access to universal access resulting in increased numbers of students who are now commonly referred to as non-traditional (Chesters & Watson, 2016). However, increased access for this group is yet to transfer to increased completion rates (Wilson et al., 2016) and graduate outcomes (Pitman, Roberts, Bennett & Richardson, 2017).

By their very nature, non-traditional students have been "traditionally under-represented" in higher education (Funston, 2012, p.5). This cohort includes those from less advantaged socioeconomic circumstances and first-in-family to attend university, mature-age students, part-time students (Devlin, 2010), and those who entered via a tertiary enabling program (Lisciandro & Gibbs, 2016). Non-traditional students may also include Indigenous Australian students and members of ethnic minorities under-represented in higher education (Funston, 2012). Collectively, non-traditional students demonstrate diversity in terms of their backgrounds, experiences and preparedness for university (Devlin, 2011). As a group they are reported to be more likely than traditional students to attrite (Department of Education and Training, 2017). Macqueen

(2017) suggested that circumstances of many non-traditional students may cause them to prioritise family responsibilities and financial concerns, which compete with their roles as university students. Typically, non-traditional students "have complex lives and competing priorities" (Devlin, 2017, p. 3).

As Australian universities focus on ways to address student attrition while intake of non-traditional students continues to expand, analyses has drawn attention to explanatory models relating to formation of student identity. In an Australian context, models proposed by Lizzio (2006; 2011) and Whannell and Whannell (2015) have furthered understanding of the phenomenon of retention and the interplay of factors associated with attrition.

### *Theories relating to student identity in a university context*

Lizzio (2006) developed a 'senses of success' model, which was derived empirically and aligned with the literature on the student experience (Lizzio, 2011). This model has informed various studies designed to better understand the experiences of university students and ways to enhance their engagement and retention (see Sidebotham, Fenwick, Carter, & Gamble, 2015; Wilson et al., 2016). Lizzio later embedded the model within a student lifecycle approach to explain the students' evolving identities as they progress towards completion of a university program. The approach proposed four phases of identity during this journey: (a) a potential student identity, (b) a student identity, (c) a graduate identity and (d) a professional identity; and suggested that different feelings, needs and purposes emerge at each phase of the student lifecycle. Our study focusses on the second phase of this lifecycle – associated with the identity of commencing students as they journey through the first year of a university program.

As Lizzio (2011) suggests, a sense of positive student identity evolves from a sense of

potential student identity and associates with a sense of (a) connection, (b) capability, (c) resourcefulness and (d) purpose. Lizzio proposed that for university students a sense of

- *connection* evolves from a sense of possible inclusion as a potential student and that a sense of connection strengthens as a result of quality relationships with peers and staff in the university context;
- *capability* evolves from a sense of belief in oneself as a potential student and that when university students have realistic understandings of the student role they develop feelings of self-efficacy and a sense of capability is evidenced;
- *purpose* is subsequent to a potential student forming a sense of aspiration and that a sense of purpose motivates university students to persist in their role when challenges arise;
- *resourcefulness* builds on a potential student's sense of feasibility concerning their studies, and enables university students to manage aspects of the university experience.

More recently, Whannell and Whannell (2015) have argued that behaviour relating to retention/attrition needs to consider the psychology of the individual. Drawing on identity theory, they proposed a model for university student identity formation. Their model identifies a cyclical path where university student identity influences behaviours relating to a university student role. Students' evaluation of their performance in that role influences, in turn, their emotional commitment to a university student identity. These authors make a significant observation that we find helpful in describing the relationship between university students' identity, role evaluation and emotional commitment to identity. They note that university students' decisions to attrite are far

more than reactions to "external, objective conditions" such as being first-in-family to attend university, or experiencing financial struggle. Instead, they highlight the "interplay of objective conditions with the particular subjective, internal psychology of a given individual" (p. 44). We find this point important for helping to explain why many non-traditional students persist and successfully complete their program of study in the midst of seemingly insurmountable conditions, while others attrite.

To explore that claim, this study seeks to identify the experiences of a non-traditional university student who persists in completing a university program despite challenging circumstances. Tinto (2017) described persistence as continuing "in pursuit of a goal even when challenges arise" (p.2). As such, persistence aligns strongly with a sense of purpose, promoted by Lizzio (2011) as an element of a positive student identity. We also seek to understand the experiences from a student's perspective rather than an institution's perspective. This approach has been recommended by other researchers, including Macqueen (2017) and Tinto (2017). Therefore, we maintain that if support for non-traditional students is to be improved, a useful starting point is students' perceptions of their own university experiences (Beer & Lawson, 2016; Funston, 2012; Macqueen, 2017; Tinto, 2017). This allows us as concerned observers to better understand – rather than assume we know about – these experiences and how these experiences may influence a student's decision to withdraw or persist.

## Case study

We chose as our methodology an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) identify as underpinned by principles of phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography. Phenomenological principles encourage description of the university experience from the point-of-view of the experiencer;

hermeneutic principles promote an interpretative stance on our part as researchers; and idiographic principles prompted our decision to use a single case study design.

Our participant in the study was Samuel (pseudonym), whose life experiences and circumstances aligned strongly with the profile of a non-traditional university student. At the time of his participation in our study, Samuel was coming to the end of his second year of study in a four-year Bachelor of Education degree. He had attrited from university in second semester of his first year in this degree program, but returned six months later to continue.

Samuel is the son of migrants who came to Australia from a Pacific Island nation via New Zealand. While born in New Zealand and having both New Zealand and Australian citizenship, he identified as an Islander having Samoan and Cook Island heritage. Samuel used the term, 'Islander' frequently when sharing his experiences. In doing this, he was referring broadly to peoples with Polynesian, Melanesian or Micronesian ancestry. Having Pacific Island heritage, Samuel is a member of an ethnic minority identified as being under-represented at Australian universities (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2013; Kearney & Glen, 2017; Tualualelei & Kavanagh, 2015). Over-representation of Pacific-heritage students in attrition data has been reported in Australia and internationally (Benseman, Coxon, Anderson, & Anae, 2006; Toumu'a & Laban, 2014).

Samuel did not transition directly to university after completing high school. He worked in factories over a four-year period, before entering university via a tertiary enabling program as a mature-age student. While Chesters and Watson (2016) found that completion of an enabling program prior to a university program encouraged retention and completion of the first year of university, there is considerable evidence that mature-age

students, who frequently take this pathway, are more likely than younger students to attrite (Moodie, 2016). Samuel is the first in his family to attend university, explaining that, "as far as my mum's side and my dad's side of the family, like blood relations, there's no one else who's been to university". Previous studies show that students who are first in family to attend university may have difficulty adjusting to the culture and expectations of the university (Chesters & Watson, 2016; Devlin, 2013; Southgate, Douglas, Scevak, Macqueen, Rubin, & Lindell, 2014).

## Data collection and analysis

Samuel agreed to talk with us about his experiences of coming to and being at university. The second author, a young woman of Samoan heritage undertaking higher degree research studies, met individually with Samuel. Like Samuel, she had come to university as a non-traditional student and was raised in a family that valued the Fa'aSamoan way, where traditional Samoan cultural values such as respect, obedience, and reciprocity guide behaviours and interactions (Tui & Iyer, 2015). Their shared experiences facilitated an in-depth conversation where they could easily establish mutual trust and openness.

With Samuel's agreement, the conversation was recorded and transcribed. We provided him with a copy of the transcript, which he confirmed accurately represented his perspective. For data analysis, we used an inductive process and a thematic analysis. The three members of our research team read the transcripts a number of times. We initially noted our exploratory comments on the transcript and subsequently transformed them into themes under a set of four superordinate themes illustrated in the narrative account that follows Table 1.

**Table 1*****Superordinate themes and subthemes***

<i>Finding purpose</i>
Parent encouragement for a better life – alternatives to factory work
Church influence – needing to educate yourself
Opportunity to contribute to family – role-modelling for others
<i>Feeling different</i>
Experiences in a tertiary enabling program
Breaking away from Islander boys
At home and at university
<i>Not knowing</i>
Ways of communicating with others
University processes and opportunities
<i>Ways of coping</i>
Effort, time management and positive thoughts
Having a helpful friend
Faith in God

***Finding purpose***

Samuel's parents encouraged him to go to university, wanting him to have opportunities denied to them as factory workers. Samuel explained how his parents reminded him to focus on study: "They were factory workers their whole life and their parents were. They kept warning me. They kept telling me that I don't want to wake up every day and go to a job that I hate". Indeed, for Samuel, his aspirations were influenced by a default position – what he wanted to not do. He sought something more satisfying than factory work, explaining: "I wasn't happy going to work in the factory. I didn't like the environment ... I knew every day I was there that I wanted to get out".

Samuel is a member of a faith-based community. He acknowledged his church's emphasis on educational opportunities, referring to his church community as "a pretty massive influence because they always stress the education point ... like educating yourself and becoming better. ... It's a part of the teachings of our church". He described how this happened: "We have events where university students come and talk about how education has blessed their life. ... They know that Islanders normally go to work after their mission". Samuel's own mission<sup>1</sup> experience was significant in consolidating aspirations encouraged by his parents. He explained: "When I went on a mission, that woke me up. You know, there's more to life than trying to get money", which was described as a common priority for many Pacific Island young people

<sup>1</sup> Mission: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church) encourages its members to undertake a mission where they share the doctrines of the LDS Church with non-members. Young men, aged 19 to 25 years, usually volunteer for a two-year mission.

upon leaving school. Samuel was also motivated to provide a role model for others:

I felt like I needed to be an example. I'm one of the oldest cousins in my family. So just to be an example for my younger cousins that you can grow up and go to uni. They see I'm a clown and stuff, but if they can see I can go to uni they'll believe that they can.

### *Feeling different*

Samuel explained he “wanted something more in life”, however, his journey often brought feelings of being different. As noted earlier, Samuel entered university via a tertiary enabling program. He spoke favourably about the program, which was offered on site at his university campus:

It was hard at first, but it was good hard. It was like dusting off a lot of the old things you left when you finished school. You have to get used to doing assignments or doing essays and everything like that. It was a good challenge, though.

However, being identified as a program participant troubled Samuel. Initially he wondered if the enabling-program pathway into university resulted in others perceiving that he and his cohort might be less capable than other students:

Everyone knew we were in the program because we met in a certain building. They'd always see us there. We were embarrassed to say that we were in the program at first, because everyone would treat us like we were dumb. Like we had to come in a different way because we were dumb.

The tertiary enabling program was a non-fee paying pathway for eligible students. Since Samuel and his program peers did not pay the university students amenities fees, they were excluded from various student support services, which intensified Samuel's feelings about being different from other university students:

Everyone around the campus knew we were in the program. We were at university but treated like we were not in a way. Like when we'd go to the Student Council, they'd say we weren't allowed to do certain stuff because we're not really uni students.

Samuel's recognition that many of his friends had not chosen a university pathway inspired self-doubt: “Knowing that uni is something you can do is important because it was something I struggled with a lot. A lot of my mates think that they can't do it”. Samuel's time commitment to university also impeded his ability to contribute financially to an extended family network:

You're in a position where you need to provide for your family and like some of your money goes out to your wife's family and so especially when your money's not going to you but to other people.

Failure to meet his family's financial expectations weighed heavily on Samuel and sometimes resulted in 'fear of not making it' at university. When speaking of these concerns, Samuel foregrounded his roles and responsibilities as a young Islander male:

The biggest thing I had to accept was just knowing that I was contributing to something in the future and get over the fear that I was not going to be contributing much to my family, because I'm not going to be working. ... Money's a big thing with us. ... Young males, we just ask how much we can contribute to our family. Being at uni and knowing I wasn't contributing to our family ... You don't really feel like a man because your mum, your wife and your sister are working and making money ... and you're just reading books all day.

While Samuel felt different from many of his friends who did not attend university, he also felt different from university peers other than Artie, another Samoan-heritage student. Artie and Samuel had completed the tertiary enabling course and had entered the same bachelor program so they attended similar lectures and

tutorials. In these learning contexts, they felt different from the majority of students:

We'd just come into class. Our lecturers always noticed us, because me and my mate were the only brown guys in the whole course. So they'd always notice us when we walked in ... but we didn't really have any kind of friendly talks. We'd just come into class.

Having enrolled in a traditionally female-dominated program, Samuel was also conscious of his minority status; he was one of two "brown guys" and one of five males in a program of over 40 students:

I think it's hard for them [lecturers] to notice who we were because of the big group ... because we were in a group full of loud females, and we kind of just sat back. ... we just zoned out. ... It was like we had to fight for their [lecturers'] attention. ... There were always people around them, asking for help. I didn't want to be another person asking them again for help, so I'd sit back and let everyone else go first.

Identities at home and at university competed. There was always the risk that Samuel might present as *fia poto* or *fia maualuga*, trying to be smarter and/or better than others. Therefore, at home, Samuel silenced his university student identity:

I did all my assessments at uni. I didn't like doing it at home. ... I think the way I could try and talk and communicate with people, like even the way I talk to you, would be different to the way I talk at home. ... I like to be who I need to be at school, but in the home I kind of relax ... I let everyone do their own thing, and then try to talk. You know, I don't want to sound like I know more than everyone. ... Because I don't like people that think they're better than someone else so I don't want to act like I'm that person. ... At home, they're like, "Oh wait, he goes to university. He knows everything!" ... because it's like a pedestal to everyone. Like to them anyways. Even though I haven't graduated from university, even the fact that I'm in

university, they're like, "Watch out, Mr University's coming." If I'm talking about something and I'll say, "Oh no, that's not that". They'll say, "Oh yeah, 'cause you're in university you know everything."

### Not knowing

As Samuel was the first in his family to attend university, the transitional pathway afforded by the enabling program helped him to enter university without having to make a formal application via the Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre (QTAC), the organisation responsible for processing applications for programs in Queensland universities:

Other than this course, I didn't know how I was going to get into uni. You know, I didn't know how to do it. I have no idea of how to do QTAC stuff so this was a really easier way to get in.

While Samuel made a good start in his first semester, passing initial assignments for all four courses, family responsibilities grew. This restricted time for study, but he was reluctant to explain his situation to lecturers. He explained:

I started having issues coming close to the end of the first semester, ... but I didn't feel that I could go up to them and just talk to them about it. I was getting married and there were issues with my wedding and things that I had to sort out. And then it took a lot of my attention away from my studies. Even though I could've talked to someone about it, I just didn't really know how to ask for help. I missed out on my last two assessments ... I know I take the blame for it. It was my fault. I didn't know who to talk to. I didn't know how I could go about talking to any of my lecturers.

It was not that Samuel did not get on with his lecturers:

They [lecturers] were nice people, but I still couldn't like walk up to them and approach them. ... That was my biggest downfall. I just didn't communicate what

was going on and I didn't know what options were open to me because I didn't ask.

When reflecting on his journey – coming to university, leaving for a semester, and having returned – Samuel recognised the link between effort and outcomes: “If you take things as they come and if you put the time and effort into it, you'll be ok. I've learned that if you put enough time and effort into everything, it'll be good”. Samuel also acknowledged the importance of friends such as Artie: “When you have a friend it is a little bit more comfortable and easier for you”.

Pacific heritage families are well represented in faith-based communities. Samuel's strong faith in God provided an additional way of coping with his university journey:

I've always firmly believed that if I am right with my Heavenly Father, then everything will fall into place eventually. And my university time hasn't been smooth so far, but everything falls into place. ... You stay right with your Heavenly Father, you're doing everything spiritually, then everything else will fall into place.

## Discussion

Lizzio's (2006) 'senses of success' model helps to identify two enabling factors for Samuel's return to university study after early attrition: a sense of purpose and a sense of capability. Samuel's strong sense of aspiration, prompted by parents, his church community and a desire to contribute to others, set the foundation for a continuing sense of purpose. This may help explain Samuel's persistence, evidenced in his decision to return to university after leaving in his first year. Samuel's belief in his ability to succeed at and through university developed when he successfully completed the tertiary enabling program and evolved as a sense of capability when he passed initial assessment items in all courses. However, a sense of connection and a sense of resourcefulness were

less visible in Samuel's narrative, with themes such as 'feeling different' and 'not knowing' suggesting constraints. These findings align with existing literature. For example, they support the proposal by the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (2013) that students from less advantaged socioeconomic circumstances do not lack aspiration but may lack understanding of ways to achieve goals. They support the emphasis of Devlin (2010, 2013) on the importance of successful completion of degree programs for equity groups, and not just issues of access to university. They are also consistent with the observation of Wilson et al. (2016) that institutional support for students to develop a sense of connection and sense of resourcefulness are particularly important for commencing university students. Findings also encourage us to act on Tinto's (2017) recommendation that we strive to understand student behaviours from their point of view, especially when their behaviours might unintentionally undermine their success. We do this with reconsideration of Whannell and Whannell's (2015) model.

Whannell and Whannell's (2015) discussion of the role of identity theory in understanding commitment to a university student identity makes the point that an individual's identity is multifaceted. Samuel's narrative suggests multiple identities. He identifies not just as a university student, but also as a member of an extended family, a faith community, and a friendship group. Samuel's association with family, faith and friends strengthened his collective identity, described as “people's sense of who they” and developed through “collective experience” (Ogbu, 2004, p.3) Three particular aspects of the experiences Samuel described demonstrated his commitment to a collective identity: (a) his sense of responsibility for his extended family's financial circumstances rather than his personal needs as a university student, (b) his effort to maintain harmonious relationships in tutorials by not challenging other students' behaviour or seeking attention



from lecturers, and (c) his decision to silence his university student identity when outside university to maintain relationships at home. This evidence suggests a salient identity aligned with cultural collectivism rather than individualism.

Typically, Australian and other western universities endorse an individualistic culture (Guy, 2015; Owens, 2008), where attributes such as independence, assertiveness, initiative, directness and self-reliance are traits aligned with academic success (Triandis, 2001). As Owens (2008) suggested, university students with a salient collective or collectivist identity find ways of “fitting in in a stand out culture” (p.70). This indeed was the situation for Samuel, who as a child and young man was socialised in the traditions of cultural collectivism, yet at university was required a perception and conduct of self as individualistic. As Markus and Kitayama (1991) suggested, collectivism and individualism – being polarised ideologies – influence dissonant sets of cognitions, emotions and motivations, and competing sets of values. Therefore, when performing and evaluating his performance as a university student, which Whannell and Whannell (2015) identified as an essential step in making an emotional commitment to a university student identity, Samuel had to marginalise many beliefs and values that aligned with his collective identity.

Our own interpretative stance in making sense of Samuel’s experience should also be considered. Samuel claimed: “I just don’t know how to ask for help”. We could interpret this as lack of knowledge or agency on his part. This deficit perspective is a likely interpretation from those of us socialised in families or cultures where individuation is valued rather than resisted, and where questioning behaviour is encouraged rather than discouraged. Samuel also said: “I don’t want to sound like I know more than everyone”. Considered through an individualistic lens, this remark suggests a lack of assertiveness or perhaps self-effacement, traits not associated with academic

achievement. However, when the same statement is reconsidered through a collectivist lens, it is interpreted as an effort to ‘fit in’ in order to maintain harmonious relationships and conform to group norms, which are essential traits for members of collective communities.

## Conclusion

Our aim in writing this paper was to deepen understanding of the first-year experience of a non-traditional student using a phenomenological approach. We did this by describing that experience from the student’s perspective and then by offering our own insights into the student’s sense-making of that experience. We found that the student often felt ‘different’ from his university peers and sometimes had difficulty behaving like them. However, this was not because he was first-in-family, a member of an ethnic minority, a mature-aged student from a low SES background or because of any other demographic feature typically associated with non-traditional students. Nor was it the result of him lacking motivation to succeed. We might have reached this conclusion had we not recognised the student’s collectivist orientation and respected the beliefs and values that underpinned this orientation.

As practitioners and researchers in a higher education context, we consider this finding significant for our own practice and theorising and for that of our colleagues. We recognise the need, and would like to encourage colleagues who work with non-traditional students, to recognise the inadequacy and therefore the unsuitability of interpretative lenses that rely on demographic categories. Such lenses may be informed by worldviews and/or understandings distinctive to the viewer’s culture and so may fail to recognise or appreciate the worldviews, understandings and therefore behaviours of those with different cultural heritage. Instead, we ask colleagues to consider the perspectives of students and to

problematise students' reports of their university experience using multiple lenses. In current times, with increasing numbers of students from migrant and refugee backgrounds where collectivist values prevail, we see the need to adopt a sense of cultural collectiveness as one of these lenses.

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