"Why did we lose them and what could we have done"?

Julie Willans and **Karen Seary**
CQUniversity, Rockhampton, Australia

Abstract*

Attrition remains an ongoing issue in enabling programs and the broader higher education sector. For more than 31 years, CQUniversity (Central Queensland University) Australia's Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies (STEPS) program has prepared students for university, many of whom are from one or more Australian Government target equity groups. A 2012 CQUniversity institutional review of STEPS resulted in significantly improved retention, yet attrition rates in STEPS are still of concern. Qualitative research conducted in 2016-17 with 23 students who withdrew from STEPS between 2013 and 2015, and 10 Access Coordinators located across those CQUniversity campuses offering STEPS, have provided valuable insights into reasons for continued attrition. Based on suggestions from students and Access Coordinators, recommendations to address attrition have resulted, the intention being to increase student success and satisfaction, and improve retention in STEPS.

Introduction

The fundamental aim of enabling programs is to assist academically underprepared learners to acquire the necessary knowledge, skills and confidence to transition to and succeed in higher education. In Australia, such opportunities have been integral to higher education since emerging in the 1970s, when a crucial objective of the reformist Whitlam Labour government was equality of access to education (Rizvi & Lingard, 2011). In creating the precedent of universal access to higher education, opportunities arose for many citizens previously unable to participate, enabling education programs representing one such opportunity. Over the last four decades, this sector has been shaped by higher education equity reforms aimed at ensuring equitable access to a diverse group of students. Estimates show that in 2010, approximately half of the students enrolled in enabling programs were from Australian Government target equity groups (Lomax-Smith, Watson & Webster, 2011). These groups include students from low socioeconomic status (LSES) backgrounds; from regional and remote areas; with a disability; and from a non-English speaking background. Indigenous students and women in non-traditional areas of study were also included (National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education [NCSEHE], 2017). This diversity highlights the unique role enabling programs fulfil in supporting and preparing students for university, and the associated challenges of retaining them.

Retention and attrition are educational issues that have long been researched around the world (Tinto 2006). Nelson, Duncan and Clarke (2009) suggest there is no single factor identified to explain student withdrawal prior to program completion, but rather, there are multiple factors responsible for attrition. The literature cites such factors as financial hardship; feelings of isolation and non-acceptance at the institution; competing family responsibilities and extra-curricular commitments; health issues; unmet personal expectations; poor attendance patterns; gaining employment whilst studying; poor academic results; and, inadequate academic induction, social orientation and lack of quality instruction (Bennett, Kottasz & Nocciolino 2007; Hinton 2007; Kift & Nelson, 2005; McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001; Pascerella & Terenzini 2005; Tinto 1993; Trotter & Roberts, 2006). Due caution must be exercised, however because of the broad range of higher education systems worldwide, the flexibility, degree of difficulty of programs, and the variance in admission strategies and assessment regimes that each adopt (Department of Education and Training, 2017a).

Students from government targeted equity groups have been found to be at a disadvantage in higher education. In their Australian study of factors influencing university undergraduate students' satisfaction and dropout and academic performance, Li and Carroll (2017) found that those from equity groups had "poorer academic scores" and were "more likely to be at risk of university dropout, with health and financial reasons identified to be important determinants for leaving university" (p. 3). In their research into understanding the completion patterns of equity students in regional universities in Australia, Nelson et al. (2017) found that across all equity cohorts, regional universities have a higher percentage of equity enrolments in bachelor programs than do metropolitan universities, and that "sociocultural, structural and economic implications of equity group membership" do impact upon completion rates (p.1). They further noted that with many students belonging to not only one, but multiple equity groups, that associated demographic and enrolment characteristics "compound to further lower completion rates" (p. 19). However, as Hodges et al. (2013) caution, causes of attrition in undergraduate settings do not always account for attrition in the enabling context, largely due to "the very different purpose and

nature of enabling programs, and the different patterns of persistence and withdrawal displayed by students in them" (p. 5). Morison and Cowley (2017), who note the paucity of literature on attrition in Australian enabling programs, also refer to the limitations of using undergraduate attrition to explain attrition in enabling programs. This study aims to contribute to the literature by providing an understanding of some of the reasons for attrition in one such enabling program.

In 2016, there were approximately 9690 Commonwealth supported enabling places in Australia However, only 52% of students who commenced an enabling program in 2014 continued to higher education in 2015 (Department of Education and Training, 2017b, p. 25). While approximately half of those students enrolled in enabling programs were not from specifically targeted equity groups (Hodges et al., 2013), research suggests that for the 50% who were, the causes of attrition were multiple and complex, with risk compounded due to their inclusion in multiple equity groups (Bennett et al., 2012; Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith & McKay2012; Hodges, et al., 2013; Richardson, King, Garrett & Wrench, 2012; Willans & Seary, 2011). Embedded in this complexity and diversity is the reality that each student's learning experiences interact in complex ways within institutional and personal contexts (Bennett et al., 2012). As Yardley, Brosnan and Richardson (2013) assert, "educational experiences are complex: multiple variables connect in a non-linear, dynamic way, effects are not always attributable or proportionate to specific causes and organisational history can have lasting and hidden influences on learning" (e1012). Thus, a deeper understanding of the complexities of attrition in enabling programs is valuable.

This paper explores attrition in an enabling program offered by a regional Australian university by utilising a qualitative methodology that allows for the unpacking of some of the complexities, such as those described by Yardley et al. (2013), of student attrition. This approach includes the student voice in the construction of narratives of their own study experiences (Hellmundt & Baker, 2017), fostering what Geertz refers to as "thick description" (see Becker, 1996, pp. 63-64). From such narratives and those constructed by staff teaching into the program, the perceived key reasons for attrition in the University's enabling program emerged and provided the foundation for a set of recommendations to enhance retention[1].

Context

This research is situated in the Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies (STEPS) enabling program. STEPS is a non-award[2] Commonwealth funded, tuition-free enabling program (comprised of a range of units) offered at CQUniversity, Australia. It is available to students in a full-time, part-time, on-campus, distance, or multi-modal study option. 1883 students were enrolled in STEPS in 2017 across the three academic terms available for STEPS enrolments. Approximately 40% of the 1883 total students studied in full-time mode, while 60% studied part-time. STEPS students are often from low socioeconomic backgrounds and classified as belonging to one or more of the Australian Government designated equity groups, similar to the composition of enabling programs across Australia (Lomax-Smith et al., 2011). Entry to STEPS is contingent upon the satisfactory completion of an on-line diagnostic testing process that assesses literacy, numeracy and basic computer skills. Following this, a pre-entry interview is conducted with each student

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[1] Retention as used here is defined as the rate at which students continue in and complete a program (Tinto, 2012, p. 127).
[2] Non-award program refers to programs that do not count towards a degree program. Students take these programs to develop their competence, upgrade their skills and often gain admission into university award programs.

by the designated campus Access Coordinator[3], during which a personalised *Recommended Study Plan* (RSP) is formulated. Students are only enrolled in units required for entry into the undergraduate degree they aspire to, and they are limited to one to six academic terms (1 term =12 weeks) to complete STEPS. Undertaken in full-time mode, dependent upon the requirements of the degree program the student intends to enrol in, STEPS can be completed over one academic term.

Significant improvements in student retention have been demonstrated in STEPS over time. Institutional data shows that retention of STEPS students across all study modes from census[4] to completion has risen from an annual average of approximately 70% of students (2001-2011) to almost 80% from 2012 to 2015 (Seary, Willans & Cook, 2016). This is significantly higher than the Australian sector completion rate of 50% (see Hodges et al., 2013, p. 25)[5]. The improved retention can be largely attributed to the instigation of recommendations from a 2011 institutional review which saw the establishment of the Access Coordinator role to oversee the pastoral care management for students, as well as the establishment of a more targeted, recommended student study plan. Another factor impacting positively on retention was the reduction in the student study load within a term of enrolment, enabling students to enrol in the number of units of study best suited to their personal situation. However, attrition continues to occur in STEPS, representing lost time, opportunities and resources, and as Baik, Naylor, Arkoudis, and Dabrowski (2017) and Morison & Cowley (2017) claim, it can be financially and emotionally expensive.

The research design

This paper presents empirical findings from institutionally funded research that investigated factors leading to student attrition in STEPS. The two research questions were: (1). What factor(s) led students to withdraw from STEPS? (2). What are the commonalities and differences among non-persisting students' stories of their experience in STEPS? Taking a qualitative research approach, individual, semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with a sample of students, each of whom withdrew from STEPS between 2013 and 2015 and an interview was also held with each campus Access Coordinator. The interviews with students were conducted during the period January to March 2017, representing a two year period since withdrawal for some and lesser periods of time for others. The purpose of the interview was to gain a greater understanding about the reasons for their decisions to withdraw. The students were also invited to provide suggestions as to how STEPS could be improved in order to better accommodate their specific circumstances and needs. The telephone interviews with the Access Coordinator were conducted during term 2 of 2017 during which time they were invited to discuss their understanding of reasons for student withdrawal, and in considering such reasons, propose suggestions for program improvement. The use of thematic analysis as espoused by Richie and Spencer (1994; 2011) allowed for the emergence and refining of themes as the iterative process enabled an in-depth analysis of key themes and comparisons both across and within the data. The research was approved through the University's ethical research process [Project number H16/11-289].

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[3] The Access Coordinators are staff on each campus who provide advice, encouragement and a degree of pastoral care. They have a significant role in the enrolment of students and are generally available for students when they withdraw.

[4] In Australian universities, the census date is the point at which the University finalises student enrolment in a semester or session. Students who withdraw after census date still pay fees and if they have a Government loan, incur a debt.

[5] Hodges et al. (2013) suggest a 50% attrition rate as being typical of those enabling programs without academic admission requirements.

Collecting the data

A total of 1596 students who enrolled in STEPS between 2013 and 2015 (inclusive) but did not complete, were invited to participate in a confidential, anonymous interview. In total, 13 females (19-64 years old) and 10 males (19-67 years old) agreed to participate. Students were provided with information about the intended research and they signed a consent form prior to the interviews. All 23 students participated in one individual, semi-structured phone interview lasting approximately 20 minutes, conducted by an independent research assistant. The students were each asked the same question, namely, their reasons for their withdrawal from STEPS and what could have been done to help prevent their decision to withdraw. Following this, 10 Access Coordinators participated in one 20-30 minute individual interview where a research assistant used semi-structured, open-ended questions. A question guide was used, asking Access Coordinators to provide reasons as to why students withdraw from STEPS, and suggestions for how student withdrawals could be reduced were also sought. All staff and student interview data were transcribed and digitised for analysis. Participants were de-identified by coding S for students and AC for Access Coordinators. Acknowledgement is made at this point of the small sample used, allowing for some reasons for attrition for this set of participants to be identified, rather than generalisable findings for all students who withdrew from the STEPS program. The themes which emerge in the data analysis will be related to theory and other studies in the enabling context in the discussion. The factors identified here may be instructive in future larger scale or cross-institutional research.

Analysing the data

Data analysis was informed by Richie and Spencer's (1994) analytic approach. This entails researchers reviewing the data, comparing and contrasting perceptions, accounts or experiences, searching for patterns and connections as well as seeking explanations. Piecing an overall picture together involves "weighing up the salience and dynamics of issues and searching for a structure rather than a multiplicity of evidence" (p. 321). Data analysis commenced with researchers working from verbatim recordings and transcriptions to familiarise themselves with and immerse themselves in the data. This enabled identification of common reasons for withdrawal as articulated by student participants and Access Coordinators. At an analytical level, abstraction and conceptualisation guided analysis, uncovering salient themes and relationships amongst patterns or explicit behaviours. In turn, this enabled "finding associations, providing explanations, and developing strategies" (Richie & Spencer, 1994, p. 186) reflective of the participants' "true attitudes, beliefs, and values (Srivastava & Thomson, 2009). The following section presents key reasons found for attrition in STEPS, fitting broadly into two categories: personal challenges and institutional challenges.

What the students said about personal challenges

Personal challenges included: physical and mental health issues; juggling multiple life roles (study, work and family commitments); affective issues and other reasons listed below.

Physical and mental health issues as reasons contributing to attrition were reported by thirteen participants. Physical health issues included: slow post-operative recuperation; illness during pregnancies and other obstetric procedures; anxiety, depression and stress; and, health ailments which arose while enrolled. As one said: *"I was struggling because my brain wasn't processing straight after surgery"* (S11F), while for another, stress related to his illness and *"the possibility of permanently losing the*

sight in one eye" (S9M), was the primary cause for withdrawal. Another participant shared: *"My health deteriorated with the pressure of study and everything. I just couldn't cope with the stress, period"* (S1F). Mental health issues, including depression and high anxiety, were cited as reasons for withdrawal by five participants, exemplified by one who spoke of how difficult it was trying to complete *when you're in a really bad place* (S23F).

Issues related to juggling study and work commitments were cited by seven participants as reasons for withdrawal. Three referred to lack of time for study, three cited workplace redundancies, inflexible rosters and changes in work roles, and one cited increased work hours. These factors were relayed via comments such as *"work was just getting well and truly in the way and there just wasn't* (sic) *enough hours in the day"* (S3M); "*I had a big commitment to my job which certainly had an impact on the amount of time I had available to study at home … I just couldn't do the program"* (S4M); "*STEPS was taking a lot more time than I anticipated… I usually spend 14 hours a day in the office so I couldn't do that as well as do STEPS*" (S12M); and, *"I had to withdraw… I just didn't feel like I had any time left over at all"* (S15F). Two participants commented on the high physical demands required when studying and working simultaneously, one feeling "*simply exhausted from my day job*" (S4M). Three participants were quite upfront in admitting that lack of time was due to their own poor time management skills, critical in their decision to withdraw: As one confessed: "*It was more my end than anything… like the time factor juggling work and all that… you have to be very disciplined*" (S6F), while another admitted that "*with work and everything, yeah, I really struggled with the time management component quite early in the piece*" (S6F).

The parallel pressures of juggling study and family commitments were reported by six participants as a key factor in their withdrawal, with many emphasising their decision to prioritise family over study. One participant confided that "*It just wasn't working for our family and our situation… I wasn't keeping up with their needs, so I had to make a decision for the best interest of our children… I just had to become Mum*" (S10F). Another withdrew due to "*all the family issues and the effect on my mind… I really just wasn't in a very good mental position to be able to do it*" (S3M). Another participant, a single mum geographically located far from family support, referred to study as "*a real struggle having to work part-time as well as look after my children*" (S2F). In demonstrating the impact of ordinary life events, one cited personal, legal and financial reasons for withdrawal, sharing that: "*We had a lot of dramas happening with going to court and everything over that and then my wife's mother died and everything became too hard… like we ended up losing our house so there was* [sic] *just too many things happening*" (S12M). Another participant told of trying to manage study, two small children and a husband who worked away. As she said: "*I just didn't have any time left over at all. I didn't feel like I had the energy to do it… I wasn't sleeping well and I was exhausted*" (S15F). A sixth participant related a change in family work circumstances prompted her to withdraw, sharing that her *husband moved interstate for his work, so I had to move interstate as well"* (S18F).

This study also found that the enabling students sometimes withdrew because of affective issues, such as experiencing feelings of trepidation upon their return to study, and low self-confidence/self-worth. As one participant shared: "*It was more daunting than what I actually expected it to be, um, just to go back and start to study again… I needed more support of others around me physically, so that was probably a big factor on pulling out*" (SM13). Another student feared that she would be perceived as lacking intelligence and said: "*I'm not stupid but it was just overwhelming to understand all that sort of stuff* (S5F). One participant referred to her learning preference of being shown how to do something physically,

"*rather than trying to read it and decipher and work it out… sometimes I have this feeling that I'm stupid, and why can't I work it out?*" (S9F). A sense of 'feeling engulfed' underpinned the discourse of six participants, manifested in references to personal challenges of a different nature that influenced withdrawal. As one shared: *I was intimidated by the maths component of the program and I really struggled… it got into my head that maybe I just couldn't do the program and it had quite an impact on me because I knew I was going to fail and I sort of beat myself up over that about it sometimes*" (S4M). This was similarly cited by another, who shared that: "*It was too much too fast. Suddenly all these complex theories that I've never even looked at and had absolutely no clue about was going on… it was really overwhelming*" (S8F). Another reflected a sense of frustration related to personal challenges, sharing: "*I'm not stupid but it was, yeah, it just got too overwhelming for me … to understand all that sort of, you know, things*" (S5F).

Finally, three participants withdrew for other reasons not easily classified in any of the above categories. For one, the program did not fulfil his expectations or needs, sharing that "*It was too rigid… I only needed to do maths and physics… and I was bored… it wasn't what I needed to do and it was just wasting my time*" (S7M). Another participant said it was "*just something to do over the holidays before I started uni in Brisbane*" (S22M). When citing his reason for withdrawal, another participant concluded: "*I was looking at ways to get a return on the investment out of my time and I figured in the end that STEPS wasn't one of them*" (S16M).

What the students said about institutional challenges

Institutional reasons identified in the transcribed interviews included: poor support from academic staff; learning technology issues; and, feelings of isolation and disconnection from the institution, including a lack of awareness of support services. These were reported by 13 participants as influencing their decision to withdraw.

Concerns with their lecturer were cited by three participants. One spoke of a lecturer who "*just found fault with whatever I did, even to the point that there wasn't anything positive when she came back to me and I completely lost it… it was just too much*" (S23F), while another related his experience of a "*less than friendly response*" from one lecturer who was *really blunt, and I thought, you know this guy is not really going to be the person to go to and say, "Look I'm a dummy and I'm struggling in your course"*" (S4M). This participant further shared the influence of this on his withdrawal, but said that "*in hindsight, I probably shouldn't have, but it really deflated me… so I found it so difficult to continue*".

Frustration associated with demands of online learning environments, lecturers' implicit expectations and assumptions of students' familiarity and confidence with information technology skills, and internet capacity/availability, were also identified as reasons for withdrawal for two participants. As one explained: *I felt quite overwhelmed … people are saying "Go here and click on this"… and a lot of it was terminology I didn't really understand … it was, ''Where can I go, who can I speak to''?*" (S11F). Encouragement and expectation by lecturers for students to actively engage in online environments was intimidating for one participant, who "*found it very hard to communicate through those forums… I'm not shy. It's the wrong word. I feel like I'm going to be condemned*" (S23F). For another student, withdrawal was largely due to a dislike of and resistance to use social media, positioning it as "*a barrier for me … so much social media stuff actually used during the courses … I just don't do social media, and I just think it's very foreign to me. I'm sure it has its uses … I'm just like one of the last dinosaurs I'm afraid*" (S13M).

The research also found that feelings of disconnection and isolation arose for some

students while studying by distance. One student felt that "*being distance, you're not part of that classroom environment or part of a conversation*" (S17F), while another revealed that *"it was just too hard from the distance side of it"* (S21F). For another, compounding a sense of isolation was lack of face-to-face contact with lecturers and peers, sharing that "*It was too hard not having someone I could physically be one-on-one with and say, "Hey, you know, am I doing this right"? You know, just simple things that you just sort of ask*" (S21F). Two participants expressed frustration about slow response rates from some STEPS staff, one saying *that's part of the reason why I dropped out*" (S8F), while the other somewhat vaguely said *there's no-one there or there is only someone there Friday or something like that* (S21F). Lack of awareness of the university's student support services or failure to avail of these influenced the withdrawal of three participants. As one shared: *"I think somehow I was too far in to know that that [*Student Services*] help was there. I had to sort of ask for that. I didn't know the help was there and I could have gone there earlier* (S23F). Lamenting his decision not to seek help earlier, one said that "*I probably didn't take advantage of the counselling that might have been available. I probably should have taken the initiative and spoken to someone at the time rather than just saying "No, I'm pulling out""* (S4M). Another student, who was aware of available services, experienced a different barrier, shared that *"It took a little bit to get through to the Disability area and I found them just really off-putting ... I just completely withdrew"* (S23F).

What the Access Coordinators said about students' personal and institutional issues

Personal issues were identified by all ten Access Coordinators as a key reason for student attrition from STEPS. The reported issues were categorised as: juggling multiple life roles (study, work and family commitments); health

issues (mental and physical); misguided motivations for enrolment; and others.

The challenge of juggling multiple life roles was reported by all Access Coordinators as a very common reason for attrition. A number of these were related to family commitments, including difficulties related to "*managing children, finances and trying to get work as well*" (AC6F); challenges associated with *"breakups"* (AC5F); and an *inability to balance the number of units with their work and family commitments* (AC8F). Family illnesses were identified as a key reason for attrition by six Access Coordinators. Unrealistic expectations of the time students need to dedicate to their studies when enrolling in STEPS were specifically cited by four Access Coordinators. As one said: "*The students really underestimate the amount of time it's going to take out of their everyday life*" (AC10F). One Access Coordinator referred to "*a mismatch between their initial expectations of themselves and what the reality is*" (AC8F), a viewpoint reflected by another who said "*I think sometimes that they think it may be easier than it really is*" (AC1M). Another Access Coordinator attributed attrition to an apparent lack of commitment by students, perceiving them to be "*unrealistic in their expectations, don't realise they have to commit that amount of time, and end up withdrawing* (AC4F).

Further issues related to juggling multiple life roles, included financial pressures and related work commitments whilst undertaking study. These were identified by eight Access Coordinators. One gave the example of students' challenges in having to prioritise paid work over study, and related that: "*If people do get an opportunity to work, if they have a class and they have to earn money, they will definitely choose to go and work for that day... if they try to negotiate for a better time to work, they lose that shift*" (AC5F). This was also stated by another Access Coordinator who spoke of the prioritising some students have to make between paid work and study, saying: *It's not going to affect their life as much to give up STEPS as it is to give up a job or*

be fired or have less working hours and not be able to have food on the table (AC3F). A further issue reported was the increasing numbers of young school leavers enrolling in the program. One Access Coordinator relayed the dilemma of paid work over participation in STEPS for these younger students, relaying that *a lot of them work part-time and then they take on more work and… suddenly …they're wrapped up with the idea of spending money and getting a job and therefore take the extra hours and forget about coming to STEPS* (AC1M). Other work-role issues reported included changes in paid work arrangements and changes in geographic relocation due to work.

The high prevalence of mental health issues amongst STEPS students was observed by eight Access Coordinators as a contributing factor to attrition. A smaller number added that physical health issues also often contributed to students' decision to withdraw.

Misguided motivations to undertake the program and other practical reasons were cited by many Access Coordinators as contributing to STEP's attrition rates. Two Access Coordinators felt the decision to enrol is imposed on some students who are *pressured by their parents to do something … being pushed into STEPS*" (AC1M). According to one Access Coordinator, the program being free of tuition costs means that for some students, minimal value is attached: "*We make it* [STEPS] *too easy for them… we've made it so flexible, it means that some students don't feel accountable for anything*" (AC1M), while another Access Coordinator said: "*Some are just treating the whole experience as a freebie*" (AC9F). Four Access Coordinators suggested that some students were motivated by government benefits to join STEPS and this led to oversubscription to units (i.e. students taking three when they only intend to complete two units) and consequent attrition from one unit.

Currently, government financial benefits are only available to those eligible students who enrol in three or more units. Two Access Coordinators related the pressure they feel, when during the enrolment interview, students resist recommendations to study only one or two units. As one Access Coordinator said: "*Some* [potential students] *will be like "No, that's no good. I've got to do three to get Centrelink[6]"* (AC10F), while the other Access Coordinator perceived that some students were only *interested in getting Centrelink payments, and putting pressure on me to enrol them in three units*" (AC2F). Another Access Coordinator believed that "*some have every intention of NOT actually participating… they're doing it to satisfy …Centrelink … they participate for maybe the first four to five weeks and then you just don't hear from them … and you end up withdrawing them* (AC4F). Enrolment in three or more units can be problematic for many students, as observed by another Access Coordinator who said, "*if they have got to do three units to get Centrelink, many just fall by the wayside*" (AC6F).

Other reasons cited and not easily grouped into these categories include one Access Coordinator who observed a mismatch in the institution's expectations and assumptions around students' access to technology and digital literacy. Overall, the principle concerns of the Access Coordinators were financial, health and family pressures that students experienced. The impact of these was exacerbated if students lacked confidence or had unrealistic expectations of themselves. Further, these situations often meant that students assigned study a comparatively low priority.

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[6] Program in the Department of Human services that amongst other services, deliver a range of payments for students undertaking further education. See https://www.elodge.com.au/Tax-Information/support-question/What-is-CentreLink.aspx

What the students and Access Coordinators said would improve the program

Both students and Access Coordinators were asked for suggestions as to how some of the issues attributing to attrition could be addressed. The ideas for improvements were clustered into four groups. The first was about student expectations and language, where both staff and students indicated that expectations of students should be made more explicit and that the language and terminology used with students should be clearer and more consistent across subjects and administrative procedures. The second cluster was associated with distance learning, where students wanted to 'sit in' on on-campus classes and have access to sustained online support. Both Access Coordinators and students agreed in this regard, and recommended rostering staff to provide student support at weekends. The third cluster was about planning, with students requesting additional resources to help them get organised. Access Coordinators suggested a review of assignment scheduling and more diligence when creating recommended study plans for students. The final cluster was about teaching, with students asking for better input on discussion boards and more timely email responses from STEPS' staff.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study set out to contribute to the literature on attrition in the higher education sector by providing a deeper understanding of some of the reasons for attrition in one enabling program. This paper has found that the causes of attrition for the students in the enabling program investigated here are broadly similar to causes of attrition in first-year undergraduate programs (Nelson et al., 2009). No single cause can be identified to explain why students leave university before completing their course (Bennett et al., 2012; Hodges, et al., 2013; Nelson et al., 2009; Richardson et al.,

2012; Willans & Seary, 2011). The research presented here has identified multiple contributing factors categorised under the themes of personal challenges and institutional challenges.

The first personal challenge identified in this study was the role of health (physical and mental). The relationship between health and attrition has been reported on in previous studies of undergraduate student attrition (McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001) where it was found that undergraduate students experiencing more depressive episodes had higher withdrawal rates than students experiencing fewer depressive episodes. Baik et al., (2017) found emotional health to be the second most commonly reported reason for first year attrition amongst students with low ATAR scores. Secondly, the personal challenge of juggling multiple roles was identified as another factor leading to attrition in the STEPS program. Competing role demands have been found to contribute to undergraduate attrition rates in studies in Australia (Hinton, 2007) and the United Kingdom (Trotter & Roberts, 2006). Hinton found that enrolling students in Australia were often unaware of the time commitments involved in different modes of study and that mature aged students with dependents often had difficulties with competing demands of university timetables, school and childcare. In the United Kingdom, Trotter and Richards noted the importance of paid work and other commitments on student engagement with learning, though no link with attrition was identified. Both of these findings are in keeping with the present study. Affective issues were the third personal challenge identified in this study about attrition, a factor which also has precedence in undergraduate attrition studies, such as fear of failure (Baik et al., 2017) and level of connectedness to staff, other students, and the institution (Baik, Naylor & Arkoudis, 2015; Lizzio, 2006). Finally, feelings of isolation and disconnection from the institution identified in this study have also

been reported on in the literature on attrition and retention by Tinto (2006, 2012).

Institutional challenges were also found to contribute to attrition in the STEPS program. Poor support from academic staff has also been discussed in studies of first year undergraduate student engagement. Trotter and Roberts (2006) noted the importance of the timing and level of academic support. Findings reported in this research about the importance of clarity and consistency of language in communication with students were also identified by Hinton (2007), especially in terms of enrolment, the induction process and the post- induction process. The same work stressed the importance of students understanding about how they can access assistance or academic advice in a language they can easily understand. Another institutional factor which emerged in this study was the role of technology access and levels of digital literacy. Issues reported here, such as internet capacity and resistance to online learning, and their relationship to higher education pathway program achievement, is less well understood than factors such as health or competing time commitments. Recent studies have suggested the importance of digital literacy in a higher education pathway program for international students (Roche, 2017) and in an Australian enabling program (Morgan, 2018).

One factor identified in this study as leading to attrition, which appears to be unique to enabling programs, is that of misguided motivation for enrolment. This represents an intriguing issue for future investigation.

The personal and institutional challenges identified above were found to sometimes operate in isolation, but often students experienced one or more of these simultaneously, with self-doubt compounding any of these. The impact they will have remains subject to further investigation. The student and Access Coordinator voices in this study have provided a number of reasons for attrition and provided suggestions for improvements in the STEPS program. While the Access Coordinators' suggestions tended to focus on the need for a more robust, formalised and committed approach by students, students called for more tailored, flexible support, particularly for distance students. Students also called for more consistent and understandable terminology across the program's administration, and the avoidance of over-enrolment in units. Both students and Access Coordinators called for more strategic scheduling of assessment and dedicated counselling services, and advised caution relating to assumptions made about students' computer skills, competency and accessibility. To this end, this paper concludes by proposing recommendations that may improve retention in STEPS, with potential application in other tertiary contexts. While these findings are immediately relevant to the program and cohort investigated here, further research on these issues at other universities could establish the contribution of these factors to attrition more widely in the sector. The impacts of recommendations from this project will be evaluated through program and unit enhancement surveys.

Recommendations

Comparable to previous studies about personal reasons leading to student attrition (Baik et al., 2017; McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001), this study found that physical, mental and affective issues influenced decisions to withdraw from STEPS. Thus, it would seem imperative that a sustained focus be placed on greater promotion of the university's support services, complemented by the appointment of a dedicated counsellor with the workload flexibility and capacity to provide timely pastoral care to students who have indicated the need for additional support. Furthermore, adopting a model of asynchronous staff support for distance students during evenings/at weekends could be a way to negate issues of disconnection and fear of failure, identified by other researchers (Baik

et al., 2015; Baik et al., 2017; Kahu, 2014; Lizzio, 2006; Tinto, 2006, 2012) as impacting attrition. The issue of competing demands of multiple life roles has emerged as a reason for attrition in this study, similarly documented by other researchers as impacting a student's ability to maintain enrolment (Hinton, 2007; Trotter & Roberts, 2006). Thus, to avoid the issue of over-enrolment in study units (subjects), a recommendation is that during the mandatory pre-entry interview, Access Coordinators and students co-create a personalised teaching-learning contract, one that clearly outlines unit expectations and schedules, acknowledges competing life responsibilities, and elucidates student and staff responsibilities. Furthermore, broaching the Department of Human Services regarding possible changes in Commonwealth funding from a mandatory three to four unit (subject) study load eligibility, to a 'per unit' eligibility, is a STEPS administration initiative that could alleviate the issue of over-enrolment

Institutional challenges influencing attrition were identified in this study and were not dissimilar to findings by Trotter and Roberts (2006) and Hinton (2007), particularly with regards to poor support from academics. To encourage inclusivity and clarity, a recommendation of this study is to adopt Hinton's advice and ensure the use of consistent terminology in all resources and correspondence across all STEPS units and administrative notifications. To avoid the creation of multiple assessments coinciding simultaneously, a further recommendation is for STEPS unit coordinators to adopt a more strategic scheduling of assessment. Finally, in order to be respectful of the wide range of students' computer skills, competency and accessibility, an emerging issue explored by others (Morgan, 2018; Roche, 2017), it is recommended that at every formal opportunity, management remind all STEPS staff to be cognisant of this issue.

This qualitative research has furthered the general understanding of attrition in enabling education in Australia through a detailed study at one site. Despite Hodges et al. (2013) reservations about extending undergraduate causes for attrition to enabling programs, the current study has shown there are many similar contributing factors to attrition from pre-university preparation programs and first year undergraduate studies. The proposed recommendations offer strategies to address the ongoing world-wide concern amongst educators, namely the lost opportunities for those students who withdraw from the higher education system. Costs to the student are not only financial, but emotional, with "possible risks to self-esteem and motivation" (Morison & Cowley, 2017, p. 12). Any positive shift in attrition achieved through the recommendations listed in this paper will be instrumental in fulfilling STEPS's fundamental aim of assisting academically underprepared learners to acquire the necessary knowledge, skills and confidence to transition to and succeed in higher education.

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