Pre-commencement interviews to support transition and retention of first year undergraduate students

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Abstract*

This paper reports the findings of a pilot study conducted at a regional university in Australia involving a pre-commencement interview strategy that aimed to better support first-year students transitioning into an undergraduate nursing program. The aim of the study was to determine the efficacy of the approach and inform the development of more effective transition and retention strategies (STARS) at the institutional level. The study was informed by Kalsbeek's (2013) '4 Ps' framework for student retention, which identifies student profile, progress through their studies, university processes and alignment between a university's promises and the student experience of its delivery on those promises as critical components of an all-of-institution approach to improving student retention and success. An additional 'P', preparedness, was identified as another important dimension, recognising that student preparedness for study is a vital component of an effective transition and retention strategy. The findings viewed through the lens of the expanded '5Ps' framework highlight the potential of the approach as an institutional strategy for improving student transition, retention and success.

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Introduction

Despite decades of research into the factors that contribute to program attrition (Kuh, 2001, 2007; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006; Tinto, 2002, 2006; Willcoxon, Cotter & Joy, 2011; Yoke, 2000; Zepke, Leach & Butler, 2010), and the importance of strategies to engage first year learners (Harvey, Drew & Smith, 2006; James, 2008; Kennedy, Judd, Churchwood, Gray, & Krause, 2008; Kift, 2009, 2015; Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010; Krause, 2006; Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005) and students from special equity groups in particular (Devlin & O'Shea, 2011), many universities continue to experience high levels of attrition (Hobsons, 2013).

The aim of the pilot study described in this article was to identify strategies that might better support students in their transition into first year to address the persistently high attrition levels at Central Queensland University (CQU), a regional university based in Queensland, which has campuses located in a number of regions across Australia. The pilot study focused on trialling strategies designed to support transition and improve the retention and success of commencing Bachelor of Nursing students. This initiative involved communicating the inherent requirements (that is, the discipline specific, essential requirements students must meet in their program and in professional practice) and related program requirements (for example, time commitment, assessment requirements, residential school and placement attendance) to students via pre-commencement phone interviews, conducted after their acceptance of an offer and prior to their enrolment and/or commencement of their first term of studies (up until Census date) in the undergraduate nursing program. The pre-commencement interview aimed to engage students in self-reflection and self-assessment to consider their personal context in relation to the inherent and program requirements. The interview was also useful in ascertaining whether a student required support services before they commenced their study, as well as whether they had an increased likelihood of becoming an at-risk student in their first year of study. More specifically, the initiative reported here aimed to:

- support the transition of students into their first year of tertiary study;

- increase retention, particularly in first year;

- increase student awareness, at the outset of their studies, of the capabilities, knowledge and skills required of them to meet the inherent requirements and achieve the core learning outcomes of their program;

- increase student understanding of the program requirements including aspects of course delivery, assessment and clinical placement as the means for achieving the core learning outcomes of the nursing program;

- provide a forum for students to raise any concerns they think may perhaps affect their ability to successfully complete the program and empower them to identify strategies that they can adopt to achieve their study goals within a collaborative and supportive context; and

- provide evidence to guide policy development and implementation, staff development and service delivery.

Literature review

The most recently reported retention and completion data across Australia (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2014) is a cohort study that provides some insights into the identification of issues that can influence retention and completion. The data:

- indicated that regionally-focused universities enrolled significantly more students classified as having low socio-economic status (LSES); and

- showed considerable variation in the retention and completion rates of students enrolled in regional universities compared to metropolitan universities—for example, students enrolled in regional universities experienced higher levels of attrition.

Focussing on the completion rates for domestic bachelor students from commencement in 2005 to the end of 2012, the data indicated the cohorts with the lowest completion rates were:

- external students (44.4% completion compared to 75.4% for internal mode students);

- part-time students (47.1% compared to 77.7% for full-time students);

- mature-aged students (57.1% of students aged 25 and above compared to 79.1% for those under 19 years);

- students with low ATAR (50.7% for those with ATAR 30-49 compared to 93.8% for those with ATAR 95-100);

- Indigenous students (45.5% compared to 72.6% for Non-Indigenous);

- regional/remote students (68.5% for regional and 58.3% for remote students; 73.7% for metropolitan); and

- LSES students (67.7% for low-SES background; 76.5% for high-SES background).

Evidence from several studies, investigating the reasons for high levels of attrition especially in first year (Cleary & Skaines, 2005; Kift, 2015, 2009; Kuh et al., 2006; McInnis, 2001; Tinto, 2006, 2002), consistently report on the disengagement of students in their first year of undergraduate study. In addition, Harvey et al.

(2006) have noted the complex combination of student characteristics, external pressures as well as institutional factors impacting on student retention, suggesting that persistence is related to student satisfaction and prior expectations. Similarly, Yorke and Longden's (2008) findings highlight the complexity of causes leading to first-year attrition, reflecting the diversity of student lives. As Nelson, Quinn, Marrington and Clarke (2012) suggest, such factors impact on student expectations and can affect the success of their transition into and their engagement with the university. Yorke (2000) suggests that institutions need to cater for student diversity by optimising the chances of individual success, echoing the recommendations of Harvey et al. (2006) who argue for greater attention to building on student strengths and engaging first year learners. Similarly, Kift's (2015) transition pedagogy addresses the need for the first year curriculum to be attuned to student diversity and accessible by, and inclusive of, all students, and she advocates for "whole-of-institution and whole-of-student emphasis that delivers a coordinated and integrated engagement and proactively intervenes to assure just-in-time, just-for-me support and a sense of belonging" (p. 51). More specifically in relation to students from LSES backgrounds, study, work and family commitments, coupled with regional location, often non-English speaking background (NESB) status, and potentially insufficient preparation for degree level study, signal the need for better understanding of their context and learning needs, and a more coordinated approach to supporting them throughout the student life journey.

The pilot study reported in this article builds on the work of these researchers who have identified the need for a more integrated and coordinated approach to ensuring the successful transition, progress and success of students, particularly those from LSES backgrounds. The pilot study has also been informed by David Kalsbeek's (2013) '4Ps' framework for student retention strategy.

According to this framework, the '4Ps' approach recognises the importance of focusing on student profile, progress, process and promise in helping to shape how universities can reframe their core underlying assumptions to improve retention. Understanding the *profile* of students is a critical component of this approach given the high correlation between student profile and retention, as evidenced from comparative analysis of retention rates of regional universities whose demographic profile is characterised by large numbers of LSES students compared to the higher retention rates for metropolitan universities. As such, Kalsbeek advocates for an affirming view of profile, suggesting that universities pay greater attention to aligning their strategies for support more closely to the profile of their students, since this defines the way in which universities position and differentiate themselves in the market place. Kalsbeek also calls for greater attention to student *progress* rather than persistence, arguing that academic progress must be at the core of the university's retention strategy. He asserts that persistence as measured by student retention, without progress, is far from a desirable outcome – timely completion is also an important goal necessitating strategies that monitor each student's progress towards completion of their program. The third 'P' focuses on the *processes*; those institutional processes such as enrolment, choosing the right courses, navigating student services and engaging with the online curriculum that may either enhance student success or impede their ability to progress. For Kalsbeek, the *promises* a university makes when recruiting future students must also be aligned with institutional performance and students' perceptions of the how well the university delivers on those promises.

Although Kalsbeek's (2013) framework focuses on retention, a more holistic understanding of retention needs to also consider transition, which should take into account student preparedness for study. Although Kalsbeek's model does consider student profile, student preparedness extends beyond the student's demographic characteristics to also consider the extent to which commencing students have an understanding of university life and both the inherent and program requirements of their chosen program of study. Inherent requirements are the essential components of a program that demonstrate the capabilities, knowledge and skills to achieve the core learning outcomes of the program, while preserving the academic integrity of the university's learning, assessment and accreditation processes. The inherent requirements are the abilities, knowledge and skills needed to complete the program that must be met by all students (University of Western Sydney [UWS], 2010). Program requirements are the important 'aspects of the nursing program' that students are required to undertake and are related to course delivery (learning and teaching), assessment and clinical placement. Specifically, this includes but is not limited to, course delivery: attending/reviewing on-line lectures and/or tutorials, attending either on-campus residential schools or clinical laboratories throughout the term depending on mode of enrolment (internal or external); assessment: undertaking various assessment items such as written assignments, examinations, group work, verbal communication tasks and assessment of clinical practice within set timeframes; clinical placement: completing blocks of 80 to 240 hours of clinical placement within health care facilities. In some instances, attendance at residential schools/on-campus clinical laboratories and at clinical placement may require the student to travel. Thus, our transition and retention approach incorporates a 5th 'P', *preparedness,* as an important component of the proposed expanded '5Ps' framework.

The pre-commencement interview initiative reported here aimed to build on the diverse abilities of enrolling students (*Profile*) by identifying their prior experiences, aspirations and expectations, to identify their

understanding of what to expect in their program and their awareness of the inherent and program requirements (*Preparedness*), and to also identify any challenges relating to their situation that might make it difficult for them to achieve their goals. This initiative is the first step in ensuring that students understand what is required for their successful progression in the program (*Progress*). Students were supported to navigate institutional processes (*Process*) that many external students find daunting, linked with services they may require and assisted in establishing a clear understanding of the role that the university can play in supporting their progression towards program completion (*Promise*). The evidence gained from these interviews will be used to inform institutional policy and practices to ensure better alignment between the '5Ps'.

Research methods

CQU Human Research Ethics Approval was obtained for the research, which involved semi-structured, open-ended, phone interviews with commencing undergraduate nursing students in two phases. Phase 1, referred to as the pre-commencement student interview, included prospective students who had accepted an offer for commencement in the Bachelor of Nursing in Term 2, 2015. The majority of students were already enrolled in Term 2, 2015 courses at the time of the interview. Phase 2, referred to as the follow-up interview, and was undertaken at the end of Term 2, 2015 to gauge these students' perceptions of how they were managing and to determine if they felt the initial pre-commencement interview was of benefit to their preparation for study and in terms of their awareness of relevant services.

Student participants

To provide an equitable and holistic approach to student service support and to increase generalisability of findings, pre-commencement interviews were conducted with as many students as possible (*n* = 124) who had accepted an offer and/or had enrolled in courses in the Bachelor of Nursing program for Term 2, 2015 and comprised approximately one third of the predicted enrolment numbers for Term 2, 2015. Of those participants, 55% were identified as students from regional or remote areas; 35% from low socio-economic backgrounds; one student registered as having a disability; one student identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander; and 7% were identified as students from non-English speaking backgrounds.

Of the students who had agreed to participate in a follow-up interview later in the term, 74 were subsequently followed up, with 38 of these students able to be contacted and interviewed at the end of the term. The data attained from this sampling of students also formed the basis of a report for the Commonwealth Government Department of Education and Training since this was a Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) funded project.

Student recruitment

The design of the semi-structured pre-commencement phone interview script was informed by the extensive literature base summarised earlier in the Literature Review section; the UWS inherent requirements (UWS, 2010); the CQU undergraduate nursing program requirements; and aspects of student diversity (study/work/life balance, cultural responsibilities, financial situation, and ability to travel). The majority of interviews were completed in approximately 30 to 45 minutes, depending upon how many relevant aspects required discussion. Interviews with a few students who had more complex issues to address took an hour or more.

The open-ended questions of the pre-commencement phone interview script (PSIS) were designed to provide initial prompts following a brief explanation of each theme to be discussed. The semi-structured open-ended approach sought to enable the interviewer to frame follow-up questions informed by student

responses to the initial questions. These initial questions focused on the following themes with the sub-text, "…we want to make sure that you get the support you need to reach your goal": Study/work/family/life balance; cultural responsibilities; financial difficulties; mental health and emotional wellbeing (inherent requirement - behavioural stability); physical disability (inherent requirements – strength and mobility; sustainable performance); verbal, non-verbal and written communication (inherent requirement – communication); learning disabilities or gaps (inherent requirement – cognition knowledge and skills of cognition, literacy and numeracy); and information technology literacy.

Data analysis

The qualitative responses from each phase of the study were analysed to identify the major themes that emerged in relation to the student profile, their preparedness and understanding of what would be required to progress through their program of studies the CQU processes they were aware of and/or had experienced, and their expectations of what the University could do to support them (Phase 1); and to determine the extent to which the pre-enrolment student interviews had impacted on the student experience and readiness for the program (Phase 2).

The analysis sought to also identify factors that contributed to attrition as well as the enablers that will in turn inform CQU's transition and retention strategy, approach to policy implementation, service provision and professional development. The qualitative responses were transcribed and interrogated through thematic analysis organised according to our expanded '5Ps' framework, addressing student profile in the first instance, their preparedness for study, supporting students to navigate the processes required to enrol and progress in their studies and ensuring greater alignment between what the university

promises to the students it recruits and what it is able to deliver.

The results reported on the themes that emerged from each phase of the study describe:

- particular characteristics of the student profile;

- how students were assisted with understanding what progression in the program would require;

- advice given to students about how to navigate the various processes involved in completing the program; and

- the extent to which students' perceptions of what they might expect in undertaking their studies, based on the 'promises' of the university, aligned with a realistic understanding of the requirements of their program.

Results

Phase 1: Pre-commencement student interviews

Study/paid work/family/life balance: One of the major recurring issues identified from the interviews with the commencing students related to study/work/family/life balance and time management concerns. The interviews provided students with detailed information about the workload involved and helped them to avoid taking on too heavy a work and/or study load, thereby seeking to avoid challenges the student might experience leading to poor results and, ultimately, increased risk of drop out and failure to reach their study and career goals. Many students underestimated the program requirements and the potential impact of combining study with either paid employment hours/week and/or significant family responsibilities. Comments made by students suggest that the contact helped them to prepare for their studies by considering various options to support decisions for a more

realistic and achievable workload balance. Academic writing, including referencing, were identified as causing concern for mature aged students having been out of school for some time and also for students who had previously completed the Diploma of Nursing, which had placed more emphasis on module completion and competency-based learning and less emphasis on academic essay writing and referencing.

Physical ability and emotional wellbeing: A few students indicated that they had physical health concerns (both of a temporary and permanent/chronic nature). Most were well managed at that point in time. These students were provided with information about how to contact the Accessibility and Inclusion services. One student had already been in touch with a Disability Advisor. Another student was advised to contact her Course Coordinator in regard to an upcoming surgery during term. A number of students raised issues relating to anxiety and depression (albeit currently managed).

Residential schools: A number of externally enrolled students from Sydney, Brisbane and other areas did not realise that they would need to travel to one of the four regional campuses for residential schools. Some students thought that because Sydney and Brisbane had CQU campuses, they would be able to attend residential schools at these campuses. Those students indicated that they found it helpful to be advised that they would need to travel to the residential school so that they could plan travel and accommodation in advance.

Feedback from students regarding the benefits of the pre-commencement interviews: The majority of students interviewed commented on how useful the interview was to them and how they felt more prepared and confident to commence their studies. All indicated that they would like to receive follow-up calls in a couple of months' time after they commenced their studies. One student said she was about to withdraw because she felt quite apprehensive about beginning the program (already having completed the Diploma of Nursing), but held off after receiving the introductory email and responded to receive a phone interview. After the phone interview, the student said she felt more enthusiastic and confident about beginning studying and was appreciative of the contact and having the opportunity to discuss discipline issues of concern. Many students commented on how impressed they were that nursing at CQU cares about their students and indicated that they found the phone interviews extremely useful for increasing student preparedness and confidence. A positive email response was also received from one student who participated in the pre-commencement interview commenting on how the contact helped her avert a difficult beginning to her studies.

Phase 2: Follow-up interviews

Of the 38 students who participated in the follow-up interviews, 25 (65.8%) students advised that their studies were going well; one student had deferred; seven students had dropped courses due to childcare responsibilities, a medical condition and difficulty navigating University websites. Of those students, all are still active in their program. Two students who did not end up enrolling in the program following pre-commencement interviews reported the reason to be dissatisfaction with staff from the Student Advice Team not responding to an email asking for advice on deferring resulting in the student applying to study at another regional university in one case; and family/work/life balance issues for the other student, though that student is still active in the program and hopes to enrol in 2016. Three students had cancelled their program of studies, with one reporting that he/she was nevertheless happy with the pre-commencement interview and support; another student cancelled their program because they were dissatisfied with the credit transfers approved (which they reported was inconsistent with previous advice provided)

and the third student cancelled their studies due to a change in their work circumstances and related financial difficulties, but reported that he/she was happy with initial pre-commencement interview.

The remainder of the pre-commencement interview students did not receive follow-up interviews either due to unsuccessful attempts at contact via phone calls despite messages being left (*n* = 36) or due to time constraints (*n* = 45) leading up to the university Christmas closure. Of these students, five had either failed their courses and/or dropped courses; nine students had deferred and/or were inactive in their program while two had cancelled their program; and one student had withdrawn.

Themes emerging from follow-up interviews

All participants confirmed that the information provided to them during the pre-commencement interview was consistent with their experience. The majority of students reported that their studies were progressing well (25, 65.8%), though many said they had felt overwhelmed during the term and/or had not expected the workload to be as demanding. Several students commented that they had nevertheless managed to keep to their devised plan of course/study workload and paid work hours/days/week (as discussed during the pre-commencement interview).

The majority of students said the initial pre-commencement phone interview was worthwhile with those who asked to rate on a scale of 1-10 giving a rating ranging from 10 to 7. Qualitative comments suggest that students found the information relating to inherent requirements for nursing "...really good; ...had been unsure beforehand...likes to be organised and initial phone call helped and gave her [student] a warm, opening welcome...didn't feel so remote and took tips ...that were relevant". Another commented that she "...likes to talk things through and pre-commencement

interview gave her [student] that opportunity". Still other students indicated that the pre-commencement interviews were useful in advising students about CQU processes and supports, noting "...yes definitely a help; ...need to do this to let students know what resources are available because students don't know what would be relevant at that time". Another recurring theme related to the sense of connection established through the pre-commencement interview process, describing the experience as "...really good; ...breaks isolation; ...someone to listen to concerns; ...already knew expectations of nursing and academia, but was good to learn about resources available, if needed".

Most students commented the follow-up email of resources was useful even if they did not need them during the term it was good to know they were there. Only a few students said the post interview email containing resources relevant or potentially relevant to their upcoming term of studies were not useful.

The vast majority of students who were interviewed suggested that an earlier follow-up interview during the term would not have been beneficial to them due to stress and time constraints; some students added that it would depend on the person, that is, if things were not going well or if they had major issues then a midterm phone call would be good. However, most students felt the end of term was better for a follow-up interview because they then knew the outcome of the term and were more relaxed, able to reflect on the term and had more time for the interview. This finding suggests the need for brief calls to check how the student is progressing throughout the term, with a longer interview at the end of term, unless the interim follow-up reveals concerns, which should be addressed during the term to mitigate student dissatisfaction and/or disengagement. Most students indicated that they had been given adequate support from CQU, however, there were a few students who did not feel as supported as they would have liked. The

majority of students were much more enthusiastic and appreciative of the support provide through the initial pre-commencement interview than they were of the support provided by the university throughout the term.

The students who completed the term successfully reported that they felt much more confident now and a number of these students were already enrolled and progressing through courses they enrolled in the following term (Spring/Summer Term 3, 2015), while others said they wanted to take a break ready for the commencement of the first term in 2016.

Discussion and conclusion

The findings of this study resonate with all five dimensions of our expanded '5Ps' framework and the interrelationship between each of these dimensions. The findings have highlighted the importance of understanding the profile of the student population. As noted in the results section, recurring issues identified in the pre-commencement interviews included financial concerns, time management issues for students working and trying to balance workload with study commitments, childcare responsibilities, challenges experienced by mature-aged students and for some students, disability related factors. The pre-commencement interviews also identified the lack of preparedness for study of many of the commencing students and helped those students negotiate more achievable course commitments, with some students deferring studies and others reducing their study load for the term. Students who were not aware of the need to travel for residential schools were better able to prepare for the time and financial commitment they needed to make long in advance of the event, and students who expressed uncertainty about their academic literacy skills were able to be referred to appropriate support services. As student feedback from both phases of the project indicates, they were better prepared and able to successfully progress through their studies as a result of the pre-commencement interviews. Students also noted the benefits of being made aware of CQU processes at the outset of their studies, and they appreciated being made aware of the inherent and program requirements, as well as the supports the university could provide to assist them to achieve their goals.

However, the finding from follow-up interviews that a majority of students were more satisfied with the support provided through the pre-commencement interviews than the supports available throughout the term highlights Kalsbeek's (2013) warning that the promises made to students must be consistent with their experiences of the processes in place to support them. For example, one student was disaffected by the delays in follow-up from relevant student support services and another indicated her intention to enrol at another university as a result of what he/she perceived to be a broken 'promise' with regard to credit transfer. The findings also highlight Kalbeek's emphasis on ensuring an all-of-institution approach to providing a consistent alignment between what a university promises to its demographic (*profile*) of students, its processes and strategies for monitoring and supporting student progress.

The findings of this study suggest that the pre-commencement interviews were successful in addressing the needs of CQU students who are predominantly studying externally, many of whom are mature-aged, located in regional locations and often working and committed to childcare responsibilities. By enabling students to share their aspirations and goals at the outset of the program at the same time as advising students about what they can expect as they progress through their program of studies, students were better prepared to navigate university processes and set realistic goals for themselves taking into account their personal circumstances. The project also helped to identify gaps in processes that were addressed during the course of the study (for example, broken links to student support services were

addressed and gaps in policies were identified and are being addressed).

The next stage of this research will involve developing a scalable and sustainable model that can be applied to other disciplines and across universities. This will involve extending the trials with partner universities, thereby building the evidence about the efficacy and affordability of the model. The challenge will be in applying this approach in programs that have very large enrolments. One of the strategies under investigation is to build on the evidence from these trials to develop a framework and online system enabling transitioning students to self-assess their readiness for undertaking study in their chosen program, while also alerting them to the actions they can take to be better prepared for study, and who to contact if they have concerns. Such a system could also trigger alerts to designated support staff in the School to contact transitioning students whose responses indicate they may need further guidance prior to commencing their studies. In this way, the benefits of the model can be retained for those students who are most at risk, at the same time, facilitating a process through which the self-efficacy of transitioning students can be enhanced.

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