

Title: Building on Identifiable Common Student Experiences to Enable Success

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Abstract

In line with current predictions, student numbers are continuing to grow in the area of pre-degree courses. Foundation education is fundamental to providing a context within which to address a number of the key priorities identified in the current New Zealand Tertiary Education Strategy. In order to meet these priorities, there is a need to gain a clearer understanding of the challenges and success experienced within personal and education contexts by foundation students. This paper presents findings of the first phase of a project designed to identify common themes and experiences across this demographic at an established tertiary institution in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The research utilises a diagnostic task implemented as part of the beginning of semester activities. Students self-report in the form of written narratives on their prior personal experiences, challenges and educational background. The task has a dual purpose, in that it serves as a personal introduction as well as a mechanism through which teachers can identify potential individual and collective teaching points. In this paper, the researchers will discuss the preliminary findings of thematic and iterative analysis that was carried out on the written narratives, paying particular attention to self-reported factors that affect success as reported by students enrolled in foundation certificates.

Collected data is able to help us align identified trends and variations to areas of support services currently available to students and teachers within our institution and wider community. Factors and early indicators that may necessitate additional areas of support are considered. This research enables us to better understand the demographic that is currently accessing foundation programmes so as to ensure accessibility, flexibility and sustained equity within and across our foundation programmes.

Introduction

While the importance of tertiary bridging and foundation courses has long been recognized in terms of managing the transition to university level for students, developing skills and building “confidence in learning” (“How to bridge the gap”), foundation education is now fundamental to providing a context within which to address a number of the key priorities identified in the current New Zealand Tertiary Education Strategy, namely assisting individuals to gain core skills and “embed the development of literacy, language and numeracy skills within a vocational or topical context that is relevant to the learner” (p.22). This initiative extends to strategies to increase diversity, and addresses “educational disadvantage” through the provision of bridging and foundation programmes, as well as for improved student performance “by providing comprehensive support programmes” (Curtis et al., 2015, p. 196). Indicators of prior academic performance which have been identified as important factors that impact on academic success include student characteristics, such as motivation and confidence.

In order to meet these expectations and priorities, there is a need to gain a clearer understanding of the experiences and educational background of students entering bridging and foundation courses. Findings of the first phase of a project designed to identify common themes and experiences across bridging and foundation students at an established tertiary institution in Aotearoa New Zealand are presented in this paper. Moreover, the research has been conducted to not only explore how students have experienced education but also to inform necessary support mechanisms for students and teachers in similar bridging and foundation programmes.

The Tertiary Foundation Programme

The tertiary foundation program in which the participants involved in this study were enrolled is delivered at a New Zealand university. It is available for both international and domestic students who do not possess the necessary academic qualifications to have the opportunity to gain access to tertiary study. Eligibility is assessed upon enrolment and students are allocated to a 60 credit or 120 credit programme depending on their linguistic

and academic backgrounds. Successful completion of the program guarantees direct enrolment into most undergraduate programmes at the institution.

Background

Previous research has focussed on identifying bridging and foundation students at risk of failure in undergraduate study in order to develop a profile of who may be at risk of poor academic performance. Research conducted at an Australian regional university has found the factors associated with attrition as follows: younger in age, lower levels of academic achievement (in the initial assessment task), high incidence of absence from scheduled classes, and the quality of peer support (Whannell, 2013). Subsequent research also reported “lower quality relationships with academic staff” (Whannell & Whannell, 2014, p. 116). The measurement of quality relationships with staff was accomplished with a small questionnaire, using a five item Likert scale. While support from peers is associated with reduced attrition during the transition into the bridging program, the support of academic staff is associated with better academic performance during the transition into the first semester of academic study.

The implication of the findings is that identifying at-risk students should be undertaken once the final assessment results become available and support staff responsible for first-year students should initiate “institutional processes” (Whannell & Whannell, 2014, p. 117). Given that institutions need to reach a “‘student-focused’ perspective” (Hinton, 2007, p. 24), this intervention would take the form of “an action plan of personal, social and academic processes and resources designed to promote student engagement with tertiary life and studies” (Nelson, Duncan & Clarke, 2009, p. 12).

Concerning the role of academic and social support, both peer support and staff support are concluded as having different roles to play in the process (Whannell, 2013, p. 296). For successful interventions to address tertiary bridging program attrition, it would require the involvement of academic staff who are able to engage with students, and subsequently develop “appropriately supportive relationships” in order to “build a more robust sense of emotional commitment to a positive tertiary student academic identity” (p. 298).

The process of “identity building” should commence at the earliest possible opportunity and included in orientation programs (one method used by tertiary institutions to facilitate student integration is through the use of orientation programs to assist in the developing a sense of belonging). More recent research has posited a framework for understanding identity, recognizing that transitions in higher education involve a sequence of overlapping and coexisting student identities (Nelson, Duncan, & Clarke, 2009, p. 1), such as the ability of a student to identify themselves in the role of a tertiary student, and where potential for conflict of identity might occur, for example, students who have had negative experiences in secondary school and who may have experienced a disengagement from education (Whannell & Whannell, 2015, p. 45).

Methodology

The researchers adopted an interpretivist perspective to guide the data collection and analyses for this study. Since this research investigates human experiences, this study was subject to human ethics applications. The application was considered by a committee and full ethical approval was gained by the University.

Thematic analysis was chosen as the most appropriate framework for the first phase of this study as it allowed the researchers to compare and contrast the emergent themes throughout the process. Thematic analysis is a method of identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. A thematic analysis was conducted across the data set in order to identify factors as shaped by participants’ responses to a written, self-reported task.

A subsequent framework for further analysis of the results will be Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). At its core, CDA is a methodology that examines the way in which language and power operate within society “at the intersection of language and social structure” (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000, p. 450), and the ways in which social structure “impinges on discourse patterns ... in the form of power relations, [and] ideological effects” (p. 449). CDA provides a useful framework for understanding interactions between “individuals, texts,

institutions and social worlds” (Rogers, 2002, p. 253), allowing us to explore in more detail how social and political inequalities might become evident through student narratives.

According to Braun & Clarke (2006), thematic analysis involves ~~there are~~ a number of distinct phases, in particular, generating initial codes in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, and collating these codes into potential themes for analysis. Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six phases of thematic analysis (e.g. getting acquainted with the data, generating initial codes, finding themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, producing the report) guided the analysis process. The researchers transcribed the data and imported the raw data into NVivo.

The entire data set was then read by the researchers and a round of descriptive coding to record initial impressions of the data was conducted. This resulted in 20 unique codes. The codes, and the relationships between the codes, were examined in order to identify recurrent themes that shaped the participants’ experiences. Vaughn and Turner (2016) note that coding themes helps to “highlight priorities and provide focus to the process of analysing qualitative data” (p. 50).

Thematic analysis “through its flexibility allows the researcher to adapt to the depth of information that the researcher requires” (Rasmussen, Muir-Cochrane, & Henderson, 2012, p. 143). In addition, it is useful as a contextual method because it “not only considers the individual making of meaning and understanding of experience but also is able to position it in the social context” (p. 143). In combination with the proposed CDA framework, it will allow for levels of analysis not only at the textual level, but also in relation to what is occurring at the institutional and societal levels, thus uncovering possible social positionings of power.

Iterative thematic analysis

Iterative analysis was undertaken through using the Attride-Stirling (2001) framework which is divided into three themes. From this process thematic networks can be established, a procedure which provides a technique for breaking up text into three classes of themes: basic theme, organizing theme, and global theme. Once a thematic network has been

constructed, it will then serve as “an organizing principle and an illustrative tool in the interpretation” (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p. 389). Themes within analysis can be identified by either inductive or theoretical analysis, the latter being a “ground up” approach (Rasmussen et al., 2012, p. 143).

Instrument

The research utilises a diagnostic task implemented as part of the beginning of semester activities. Students self-report in the form of written narratives on their prior personal experiences, challenges and educational background. The task asked students to use examples from their personal experiences and educational background to write at least 250 words in response to the following:

- In what areas have you been successful?
- What challenges have you faced?
- For you, what factors affect your success?

It has been raised in other contexts, “Is self-reporting a valid indication of what students really think” (Clarke & Hernandez, 2011, p. 76). This has been taken into consideration, in that the task is designed for research purposes and also serves as a personal introduction from the student to the teacher. Furthermore, it has been shown that CDA lends itself particularly well to analysing students’ reflective writing, itself an excellent tool for helping teachers both to identify the level at which their students are functioning and to provide the appropriate support to promote their continued learning (Garmon, 1998, p. 34).

NVivo, a qualitative analysis software product, aids analysis by coding data according to a classification scheme that allows easy identification, indexing, or retrieval of data during analysis. NVivo has been found to enhance the qualitative research process and “expand analytical avenues” (Auld et al., 2007, p. 37). NVivo allows the researcher to organize participant responses so they can be compared, contrasted, and categorized according to patterns. This provides a capability to do more sophisticated comparisons; however, it does not replace researchers for data interpretation, who might still provide “a better contextual understanding of the concepts or patterns that emerge from data analysis” (Auld et al.,

2007, p. 47). NVivo is a useful software tool to organize and capture descriptive data which allowed the researchers to gain a deeper understanding of students' needs and expectations. NVivo is a useful software tool to organize and capture descriptive data which allowed the researchers to gain a deeper understanding of students' needs and expectations. Challenges include difficulties associated with "[u]sing interpretation appropriately" (Vaughn & Turner, 2016, p. 43). It is therefore considered important to keep in mind that this is a "recursive process" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 86) and that a common criticism of coding is that "the context is lost" (p. 89). Thus it is important to be able to retain a little of the surrounding data if relevant to ensure contextual relevance is maintained.

Findings and Results

Respondents were asked to identify factors that they perceived affected their success. The responses from 43 students enrolled in foundation courses were read and coded into categories. These categories were grouped into five over-arching themes (as depicted in Figure 1). The theme that was most prevalent in the narratives indicated individual factors were most likely to affect success. The second most dominant theme was social factors, followed by physical and economic factors. One theme that appeared to cross all of these aspects was time. Each theme is explored in the following subsections.

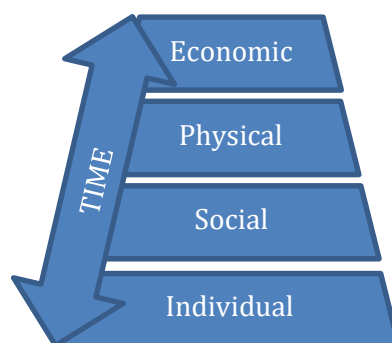


Figure 1: Identified Themes

Individual factors

The most prominent theme identified by students referred to factors that influence students on a personal or individual basis. The categories that were identified as affecting the individual included confidence, learning preferences, completion, and motivation.

55% of the students explicitly indicated or implied a lack of confidence in their own abilities. Students appeared to report very low levels of self-confidence or signalled having experienced failure/an expectation of failure.

- *If I don't understand anything in class, I tell myself I'm going to fail and end up stressing more which affects how I do my work.*
- *my surroundings pressuring me and telling me I'll fail if I don't work harder makes me feel like I've already failed.*
- *I have not succeeded in anything so much.*
- *It took me a long time to believe I was smart enough or good enough to attend any university.*
- *I felt inadequate to those around me.*

Ten students reported that the factor that most affected their success was active engagement or interest in what they were learning. Several students commented that if they were actively enjoying what they were learning or the environment that they were learning in they would be more successful. Some students referred to a preference for task based learning approaches:

- *I need to do and experience things before I am able to fully understand and to help me succeed in what I am doing.*

One in seven of the respondents who completed the written narrative reported having difficulty in completing tasks. Some comments that were made included:

- *I am good with planning out things but not so much going through with them.*
- *Assignments are something I usually find more difficult and usually leads to me not handing assessments in on time or at all.*
- *... only end up giving about 70% when I could've been giving 100%.*

- *I get stressed and give up easily.*

The final category that was acknowledged as a factor that affected success was motivation. When drawing on personal experiences and educational background, five students made direct mention of being able to “stay motivated” as a factor that was likely to affect their potential success.

Social factors

The second most commonly identified theme was social factors. 29 respondents identified social factors were likely to affect their success. Social factors included commitments to social relationships, such as to family and peers, the ability to communicate with others and cultural obligations.

A quarter of the students mentioned family commitments ranging from parenting obligations to caregiving for elderly relatives. Students also expressed the role family support as a factor that affect their success.

- *my commitment to my family as well as to myself.*
- *there's a lot going on with family.*
- *Personal family matters interrupted my learning and before I knew it, it was too late.*
- *The factors were normally affected my success in positive way are, family.*

Many students mentioned social relationships with peers as a significant factor in their success. To some students peers were a positive influence offering study support, for example, one student wrote, “My friend, well she affect me a lot ... She gave me power and taught me how to understand.” Whereas others mentioned the role peers could have that may not affect their success as positively:

- *I became easily influenced by my peers choices which caused stress within my schooling life.*

The other relationship that featured predominantly in the narratives was the teacher-student relationship.

- *peers of my studies as well as my teachers would affect my success.*
- *communication with my teachers is a valuable asset and will take advantage of their knowledge.*

Communication also featured as an element affecting social interaction. Slightly less than 20% of students mentioned language as being an important factor that could affect their success. This was reflected across both international and domestic students alike.

- *sometimes I felt upset when I forgot some English words during talking with others*
- *Māori is my first language and I also struggle with the English language*
- *I'm not confident for my English*

Physical factors

Another factor identified was physical factors. Physical factors perceived to impact success included the issue of transportation as one student commented “living in South Auckland the travel time eats into my study time”. Other students reported moving from one school to another during secondary school, as a key factor that interrupted progress.

Within the physical factors, eight students identified health issues and an additional five respondents who specifically identified stress as a factor that affected success. Respondents identified health issues that had prevented them from successfully gaining entrance into tertiary studies.

- *really struggled with some serious health issues. The issues aren't just minor colds but more serious and sometimes life threatening.*
- *Having ongoing health issues has and will affect my success.*
- *One day I could be fine, the next in hospital*
- *I failed to get university entrance after getting sick and missing my exams*

- *I have faced mental illness with bad atmosphere.*

For some students these health issues continue throughout their studies and have necessitated the need to complete foundation or bridging courses to enable them to enter tertiary education.

Economic Factors

Economic factors were identified the least. Only one in ten mentioned their jobs, one of these was working five days a week in addition to full time study, may impact their success whilst three others referred to economic pressures on their studies.

- *The factor that can affect my success is overall money not having enough to pay for rent is the major.*
- *Complete a bridging course without having to deal with the financial issues I was dealing with*

Time

Unlike the other themes, one theme was found to cross the four previous themes (n=28). This was the theme of time. Respondents expressed concerns regarding time management and distractions.

- *time is a big issue which will affect my success.*
- *Another big challenge for me is time-management.*
- *Time management is a critical factor for anyone,*
- *Prioritising study and uni work will also be a must if I wish to succeed*
- *affect my success is how many distractions I have in my life*
- *easily distracted by, the people around me.*

Eight respondents mentioned “procrastination” as an issue:

- *procrastination can hinder me*
- *assignments are something I usually find more difficult and usually leads to me not handing assessments in on time or at all.*
- *Being lazy and being good at procrastination affects my study habits.*
- *Procrastination is a big problem for me because if the study and assignments pile up*
- *Time usage and procrastination are my biggest challenges*

Students clearly identified an awareness of procrastinating negatively affected their opportunities for success.

Also related to time were gaps in continual, formal education ...

- *I have had one and a half gap years so getting back into studying*
- *I have been out of learning environments such as school for over 10 years*
- *In the four years since I have left school*
- *I haven't been to school in six years*

Some students have left formal education without completing through to Year 13 or have completed secondary schooling but have chosen to complete a foundation certificate prior to starting a bachelor degree.

Future directions

In order to gain further insights, the researchers will conduct interviews with the participants to examine the interpretive validity of the findings as an integral part of the second phase of this research. Given the diverse cultural backgrounds of some students, participants will be offered the opportunity to expand on what they had written, through informal (semi-structured) interviews. These discussions afford the opportunity for students to further elaborate on how they have experienced challenges and success within personal and education contexts.

By having a clearer understanding of the self-reported factors that students identified as affecting their success, academic and support staff are able to improve the pre-degree experience for foundation students. The data collected can now help us evaluate areas of support currently available to students and teachers within our institution and wider community. The trends and variations can be further explored to strengthen support for this demographic. In particular, factors and early indicators that may necessitate additional areas of support can be considered. This research has enabled us to better understand the demographic that is currently accessing foundation programmes so we can ensure future improved accessibility, flexibility and equity within and across our foundation programmes and similar contexts.

The process of orientation and enculturation should also not be considered to cease once the semester has commenced. Foundation courses need to consider how to work on reassuring students, by instilling confidence, improving motivation, and supporting individual, social, physical and economic factors, as well as designing study strategies which explicitly emphasize time issues.

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