Indigenous education: Factors affecting students’ decisions to continue or withdraw from Tertiary Studies at Flinders University

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This study examined the perceptions of 38 current and former Indigenous students at Flinders University, Adelaide, South Australia, about the factors which influenced their ability to study at university. The study took place at the beginning of second semester 2000. While it was originally intended that students would be surveyed twice circumstances did not allow this to occur. Preliminary findings suggest that: Indigenous support services are perceived by students as enabling factors in their tertiary studies; younger students are more likely to discuss their tertiary progress with their peers rather than teaching or support staff, unlike older students; female and part-time students believe they would perform better if they had greater domestic support; the lower the Grade Point Average (GPA) the greater the perception of their likely-hood of dropping out and those students who consider dropping out of tertiary studies are more likely to do so.

Indigenous education, Tertiary Studies

BACKGROUND

It is generally agreed that the high attrition rates for Indigenous students in higher education is unacceptable. In general, research on retention rates in higher education tends to focus on the completion and withdrawal of first year students. This is taken as an indicator of overall retention/attrition. There has also been a focus on the implementation of institutional strategies to increase access to higher education by identified equity groups such as Indigenous Australians (DETYA, 1999a). While there has been an overall increase in student numbers over the past ten years due to amalgamations, the falling job market, access and equity policies (such as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Access Entry Scheme at Flinders University) and the increase in overseas students this has generally not been reflected in university policies. Policies and academic expectations do not reflect factors such as lack of prior preparation or the diverse enrolment patterns of equity groups in higher education (Barrett, 2000). Both these have been found to be factors in student withdrawal, though not all withdrawals are perceived as negative. Some find that the course content does not match their goals, interests or expectations.

McInnis and Jones (1995) found that uncertainty about course choice and dissatisfaction with their university experience has a major impact on students’ motivation to study. Price, Hart and Cole (1991) identified other factors. They identified issues such as employment demands, financial concerns, study workloads and fear of academic failure as impacting on student’s perceptions of their university experience. These were categorised as internal/external factors by Killen (1994). As would be expected Sharma and Burgess (1994) found an inverse relationship between academic success and attrition. In general, females, mature aged and students who matriculated from government schools were more likely to perform above average and succeed in higher education (Lewis, 1994).
These factors were also present for Indigenous students however, the attrition rates are much higher than those of other categories (DETYA, 1999a). Bourke, Burden and Moore (1996) and Luck (1998) found that Indigenous Support Units in higher education assisted Indigenous students in their studies. Students felt less isolated, less alienated and more at home with the support of Indigenous units. Along with Walker (2000) they also identified personal motivation, dissatisfaction with course of study, lack of family support, financial issues, workload and fear of failure as reasons for Indigenous student’s withdrawal from higher education.

This study examined the factors thought responsible for the attrition/persistence of Indigenous students at Flinders University. It was designed in order to provide both academics and support staff with the information to assist intervention with students where appropriate. It aimed to improve the likelihood of Indigenous students continuing tertiary education. Unlike past studies of exit surveys that focussed on the effects of financial, family and personal problems, and issues with low grades and education delivery modes (Bin-Sallik, 1990; Bourke, Burden & Moore, 1996), this study also examined whether or not student identity was a factor in Indigenous students attrition/persistence in university (do students identify with the role of being a student and consider themselves successful) (Slade & Morgan, 1998).

**Procedure and Methodology**

The study used a modified survey similar to that administered by Dr Salah Kutleileh of the Flinders University Study Skills Centre to NESB and overseas students. It is envisaged that the data collected by Dr Kutleileh can be further compared with the Indigenous and the general student body of Flinders University. This data can then be used to ascertain any similarities between these groups of students and the implications that this will have for the delivery of academic support services (this will be the subject of a later report).

The participants in the study were from two groups - those Indigenous students who were enrolled in first semester but were not in second semester and those who were still undertaking study. The survey was designed gather two types of data. The first part established demographic data such as gender, age, course of study, year level, living arrangements, whether they have a disability, prior education/work history and mode of study (fulltime/part-time). The second part elicited responses to questions exploring the interaction between personal and academic factors and identity as a student on their attrition/academic success. This data was compared with the students self ranked likelihood of withdrawing from studies and whether or not the student had dropped out of university (self reported in the survey or ascertained by the students enrolment status in 2001).

Given that the literature identified the (following) enabling and inhibiting factors we expected to find that:

a) students who consider themselves to be good students were more motivated, achieved higher Grade Point Averages (GPA) and had a lower likelihood of withdrawal;

b) Indigenous support services would be perceived as enabling tertiary study;

c) family/peer support would be a factor in enabling tertiary study and

d) responding to financial issues would be an inhibiting factor on tertiary study.

All Indigenous students, including those who had not continued on from first semester, at Flinders University were administered a Likert Scale survey (mailed to their home address - see attached) during the first weeks of semester 2, 2000. Students were contacted via e-mail, phone, mail and at student meetings and appraised of the importance of obtaining base data. Those students who do not fill in their surveys were followed up via phone and mail.
Analysis involve descriptive statistics and path analysis to determine the factors effecting student withdrawal and identify the pattern of causal relationships among variables contributing to the decision making process. Data was analysed using SPSS and PLSPATH ver 3.01 (Sellin, 1990) computer programs. All interview data will be subjected to comprehensive content and discourse analysis for more detailed reporting (Hatch, 1992 and Tesch 1994).

### Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Gender and Age of Respondents</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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<tr>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of these students 26% hold scholarships, 35% are studying part time, 68% have come to tertiary study after working, and 23% have left employment to come to university (See Table 1).

Analysis of the results showed the following:
1. Students likelihood of dropping out of tertiary studies is significantly higher if it has been considered \( r = .548 \ p = .002 \).
2. A good orientation program is perceived as an significant enabling factor in staying at university \( r = -.383 \ p = .044 \) as was support from Yunggorendi (Indigenous Student Services) staff \( r = -.519 \ p = .005 \).
3. Students rated social life of the university as an significant inhibiting factor on their likelihood of dropping out of university – the better the social life the less the likelihood of dropping out \( r = -.567 \ p = .001 \).
4. The higher that students scored goal orientation the less the likelihood of their dropping out \( r = -.457 \ p = .013 \).
5. Age was also a factor in the likelihood of student dropping out of tertiary study – those students over 21 years of age were significantly less likely to drop out of university \( r = -.488 \ p = .005 \).
6. Students who considered themselves natural scholars had significantly higher GPA \( r = .459 \ p = .024 \).
7. The higher a students motivation the their GPA \( r = .417 \ p = .034 \).

### Discussion of Results

It was not possible to undertake quantitative analysis of differences that may result from gender, age, self esteem, or academic experience due to the limited number students involved in the study. However, the results of the survey indicate that tertiary educators and Indigenous support services play a crucial role in enabling Indigenous students tertiary education. As expected, students who considered themselves to be good students (high self esteem) were found to be more motivated, achieved higher GPA and had a lower likelihood of withdrawal from university study. And of course those students that had lower self esteem were less motivated and more likely to drop out of university study. Those students that indicated that they had considered dropping out of tertiary study were more likely to do so. Female students indicated that negative feedback of tertiary work was more likely to be an inhibiting factor in tertiary study. The role of Indigenous support staff was also found to be an enabling factor for Indigenous students over the age of 21 although female students are more likely than male students to access support staff. Female students are also more likely to discuss their problems with family members than male students were. Indigenous students under the age of 21 tended to prefer advice from their peers when considering dropping out of university. This is problematic as those students who come to tertiary studies straight from school (under 21 years of age) are less motivated than those who come to tertiary studies after
working. It follows then that in order to increase or maintain the academic performance of Indigenous students in tertiary study will require increasing Indigenous students self esteem.

Reflecting the current employment conditions many students indicated that their primary motivation for undertaking tertiary studies was related to increasing their chances of gaining better employment. And financial factors were found to be an issue for students concerns about their ability to continue studies. Part time and female students indicated that lack of domestic support from partners and family were an inhibiting factor in their tertiary education. Students indicated that the social activities of Indigenous support centres were an enabling factor in their studies.

The preliminary indications from this study suggest that if Universities wish to meet equity targets for Indigenous participation in tertiary education then the role of Indigenous support services will be central. It also indicates measures need to be implemented to assist those students who come straight from school to university study. These students are less likely to access support services and are at a greater risk of dropping out of tertiary study. While increasing and maintaining Indigenous participation in tertiary education may entail educators placing greater efforts in building Indigenous student’s self esteem, this would appear to be a crucial issue for younger students who are less likely to raise their concerns with Indigenous support staff. Despite a greater commitment to Indigenous access to tertiary education across all university sectors this study indicates that Indigenous support centres are essential in enabling Indigenous students to participate in tertiary studies.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


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Bourke, C, Burden, Jennifer and Moore, Samantha (1996) *Factors Affecting Performance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students at Australian Universities: A Case Study*, Commonwealth of Australia, AGPS.

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THE FLINDERS UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Personal and academic factors affecting students’ decisions to withdraw, from or persist with study at Flinders University

Name (optional) ___________________________ Student Number [ ]

Faculty ___________________________________ School/Discipline ________

Please indicate the responses which are most relevant to you by placing a tick (✓) in the appropriate box.

1. Gender
   - Male
   - Female

2. Age
   - 17 – 20
   - 21 – 25
   - 26 & over

3. Current Living arrangements
   - Living with a partner
   - Living alone
   - Sharing with members of your family
   - Other. Please specify ____________

4. Were you born in Australia?
   - Yes
   - No

5. If not, please state your place of birth _______________________

6. How long have you been living in Australia? 
   - Years

7. Are you an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Australian?
   - Yes
   - No

8. Do you hold a Scholarship?
   - Yes
   - No
   If yes, please specify _______________________

9. Do you have a disability?
   - Yes
   - No
   If yes, please specify _______________________

10. Which of the following corresponds with your background?
    - Non English speaking background
    - International student
    - Local student

11. Are you currently enrolled at University?
    - Yes
    - No
    - Full time
    - Part time

12. What course are you undertaking? ______________

13. At what stage did you commence
    - Soon after I completed my undergraduate studies
    - After working for about five years
    - After working for more than five years

14. Which, if any, of these statements represent how you see yourself as a student?
    - Strongly Agree
    - Agree
    - Undecided
    - Disagree
    - Strongly disagree
    5 4 3 2 1
I’m a natural scholar 5 4 3 2 1
I’m an average student, neither brilliant or hopeless 5 4 3 2 1
I could be a good student if I made the effort 5 4 3 2 1
I’m too old to be a student 5 4 3 2 1
I work well with abstract and theoretical concepts 5 4 3 2 1
I could be a good student if my life wasn’t so difficult 5 4 3 2 1
I could see myself as a career academic 5 4 3 2 1
I’m bright enough to be a really good student 5 4 3 2 1
I’m a really motivated student 5 4 3 2 1
I don’t really fit into university 5 4 3 2 1

15. In this last semester (Semester 1)
Have you considered dropping out of university? 5 4 3 2 1
Have you considered withdrawing from a subject? 5 4 3 2 1
Have you considered reducing load? 5 4 3 2 1

16. When you were thinking about dropping out (withdrawing from a subject/reducing your load) were any of these factors involved?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very strongly</th>
<th>Strongly</th>
<th>Undecided</th>
<th>Moderately</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Academic Factors:**
- negative feedback on work 5 4 3 2 1
- low grades 5 4 3 2 1
- high workload 5 4 3 2 1
- poor quality of teaching 5 4 3 2 1
- timetable difficulties 5 4 3 2 1
- difficulty of tasks 5 4 3 2 1
- style of learning 5 4 3 2 1

**Personal Factors:**
- loneliness 5 4 3 2 1
- stress 5 4 3 2 1
- separation from family/friends 5 4 3 2 1
- work commitments 5 4 3 2 1
- relationship commitments 5 4 3 2 1
- a critical event 5 4 3 2 1
- health 5 4 3 2 1
- disability 5 4 3 2 1

17. When you were thinking about dropping out (withdrawing from a subject/reducing your load) did you discuss your options with any of the following people?

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other family member</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecturer</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Counsellor</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Skills Adviser</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yunggorendi Support Staff</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
18. How would you rate the likelihood that you will drop out?

Very strongly | Strongly | Undecided | Moderately | Not at all
---|---|---|---|---
5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1

19. What changes in your circumstances would make you less likely to leave?

Strongly Agree | Agree | Undecided | Disagree | Strongly disagree
---|---|---|---|---
5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1
increased support from teaching staff 5 4 3 2 1
making friends on campus 5 4 3 2 1
improvement in financial situation 5 4 3 2 1
changes to the timetable 5 4 3 2 1
increased support with domestic/family duties 5 4 3 2 1
getting better grades 5 4 3 2 1
doing your course over a longer timeframe 5 4 3 2 1
a good preparation/orientation program 5 4 3 2 1
more help from Yunggorendi Support Staff 5 4 3 2 1

20. If you decided not to drop out, to what degree have the following factors influenced your decision to stay?

Very strongly | Strongly | Undecided | Moderately | Not at all
---|---|---|---|---
5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1
this qualification will lead to a job 5 4 3 2 1
this qualification will lead to a promotion 5 4 3 2 1
I am getting support from the Yunggorendi 5 4 3 2 1
I am getting support from a study adviser 5 4 3 2 1
I like to succeed at what I do 5 4 3 2 1
The social life at university is good 5 4 3 2 1
I don’t want to disappoint my family 5 4 3 2 1
I have promised myself I will finish 5 4 3 2 1
I can’t think of anything else to do with my life 5 4 3 2 1
I like the teaching staff 5 4 3 2 1
I am hoping next year will be better 5 4 3 2 1
My partner is encouraging me to stay 5 4 3 2 1
My friends are encouraging me to stay 5 4 3 2 1
My family is encouraging me to stay 5 4 3 2 1

21. If you decided to drop out, would you come back to complete your studies at a later date
☐ Yes ☐ No

22. Are you interested in participating in group discussion(s) that will focus on issues similar to those addressed in this questionnaire?
☐ Yes ☐ No

Please return the questionnaire in the pre-paid envelope provided.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION.