

Beyond our control?: Pre-tertiary bridging program students' perceptions of factors that affect their progress with study

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Abstract

The general purpose of the research study reported here was to gather students' perceptions of factors which influenced their progress with Tertiary Preparation Program (TPP) studies at the University of Southern Queensland. A considerable body of research has been published on factors that affect the progression of undergraduate students. No similar studies with pre-tertiary bridging program students have been found in the literature. The main methodology employed in the study was analysis of data gathered by the use of a self-report questionnaire. Construction of the questionnaire was based on the outcomes of a study, undertaken by the author and a colleague in 2004-5, of factors which influence undergraduate student progression. The questionnaire was delivered to all students enrolled in the core course TPP7120 in a sample of semesters in a sample of years from 2006 to 2009. The results of the study reported here indicate that factors perceived by students to have most strongly influenced them to discontinue their studies were those relating to personal circumstances that were beyond the control of the course teaching team or the University. Factors which were perceived by students to have most strongly influenced them to continue included factors related to personal volition, social/family support, institutional support, and the quality of the teaching-learning experience. Based on the results of the study, suggestions are made as to how retention rates in pre-tertiary bridging programs could be increased.

Introduction

A research project titled *An investigation of candidate contributing causes of USQ Tertiary Preparation Program (TPP) student non-progression to USQ undergraduate programs*, funded from the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) Strategic Development fund 2005, was implemented in the 2006 academic year. The project involved gathering and analysing data on TPP students' perceptions of a range of variables relating to their progress with their study. This paper provides a report on the implementation of the project. The general aim of the project was to identify factors that students who undertook the Tertiary Preparation Program (TPP) perceived to have influenced their progress through the TPP,

and the relative strength of influence that students perceived each of these factors to have exerted.

The discontinuation rate of students who enrolled in the TPP remained steady at approximately 50% during the period 2000-2005. Anecdotal information indicated that University senior management regarded this rate as unacceptably high, and that they expected actions to be taken by TPP staff to lower the rate. Up to 2006, TPP staff had no credible data on which to base actions aimed at lowering the student discontinuation rate. Anecdotal evidence gathered informally by TPP support staff indicated that the reasons students gave for discontinuing their TPP studies were associated with their personal circumstances rather than discontent with the TPP or the University. However, prior to 2006, no systematic, formal evidence of the reasons for student discontinuation of TPP studies had been gathered. The project was undertaken to gather this type of evidence.

The project commenced with a review of the literature on factors associated with student progress with formal studies at the post-compulsory education levels. No reports of studies of factors that were associated with the progress of students in tertiary preparatory programs were located in the literature. The methodology and instrumentation for the study were based primarily on published work of Martinez and Munday (1998), McInnis, James, and Hartley (2000), Taylor and Bedford (2004), Weston (1998), and Yorke (1999).

Methodology and instrumentation

The method used in the study consisted of a student survey. The instrument used in the survey was a questionnaire about students' perceptions of influences on their decision to continue or discontinue with their study. A copy of this questionnaire was mailed to all students enrolled in course TPP7120 in the 2006 academic year.

The questionnaire items were designed to sample individual students' ratings of influences on their decision to continue or discontinue their study during the semester. A list of influences that appeared to be associated with discontinuation of formal post-compulsory study was identified primarily from the work of York (1999) and of Weston (1998). The list was the initial basis for the development of the questionnaire items. The design of the questionnaire was modelled on the design of a questionnaire developed by Taylor and Bedford (2004) to gather data on perceptions of university teaching staff of factors which are related to student non-completion of study. In the questionnaire of Taylor and Bedford (2004) items were grouped into several general categories which were regarded by the authors as general factors. The questionnaire used in the study reported here consisted of items grouped into the following five general categories of apparent influences on students' decisions to continue or discontinue study:

- General environment of the student (7 items)
- General interaction between the student and the university (6 items)
- Individual student characteristics (9 items)
- Interaction between student and teaching staff (7 items), consisting of -
 - Expectations made by staff (3 items)
 - Expectations made by student (4 items)
- Course and study materials design and content (5 items)

Design and development of the questionnaire was monitored by a registered psychologist who was experienced in student counselling in higher education. The psychologist provided advice on the structure of the questionnaire and the wording of the items. A trial of the draft questionnaire was conducted under the supervision of the psychologist, and the instrument was reviewed in light of the conclusions drawn from data obtained in the trial.

Respondents were requested to indicate, for each individual item, that the item described an influence they experienced to continue study or, alternatively, to discontinue, and then to rate the strength of the influence on a four point scale. The item displayed as Figure 1 shows the general form of all of the items.

1. The standards that you were expected to meet in the course(s)	C	D	1	2	3	4	5
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Figure 1: Example of the questionnaire items used in the study

Students were asked to check C if the content of the item was an influence on them to continue their TPP study, or to check D if the content of the item was an influence on them to discontinue their TPP study. They were asked to rate the strength of the influence by checking 1, 2, 4, or 5, with 1 representing no influence and 5 representing extreme influence. Students were asked to only check 3 if they could not, or declined to, respond in any other way to the content of the item.

Sample

The target sample consisted of all students who enrolled in course TPP7120 *Studying to succeed* in the academic year 2006. TPP7120 is undertaken by all students who aspire to successfully complete the core component of the TPP It is offered in distance education mode in all three semesters of the academic year. Ninety-three completed questionnaires were returned by students, constituting approximately 11% of students who remained enrolled in the course after the semester census dates during the 2006 academic year.

Results and interpretations

The content of all questionnaire items which respondents rated as either 4 or a 5 either to continue or to discontinue were characterised as a 'definite influence'. Tables 1 – 5 below here show all questionnaire items which at least 25% of respondents rated as a definite influence to discontinue.

Table 1: General environment of student - influence to discontinue

Item	% discontinue	% continue	Total % definite	Total no. of responses
Other demands on your time, besides studying	45	23	68	80
Advice or opinion from your friends or other USQ students	41	14	55	87

Table 2: General interaction between the student and the university - influence to discontinue

Item	% discontinue	% continue	Total % definite	Total no. of responses
Your feelings about 'belonging' or 'not belonging' to the University community	27	33	60	93

Table 3: Individual student characteristics - - influence to discontinue

Item	% discontinue	% continue	Total % definite	Total no. of responses
Your ability or inability to remember information	34	22	56	89
Your general study-management skills, such as time-management and planning and scheduling your study program	28	46	74	92

Table 4: Interaction between student and teaching staff - - influence to discontinue

Expectations made by staff				
Item	% discontinue	% continue	Total % definite	Total no. of responses
nil	0	-	-	-
Expectations made by students				
Item	Total % definite	% continue	Total % definite	Total no. of responses
nil	0	-	-	-

Table 5: Course and study materials design and content - influence to discontinue

Item	% discontinue	% continue	Total % definite	Total no. of responses
Knowing or not knowing what you were required to do to obtain a pass in the course(s) in which you were enrolled	30	24	54	89

Specific influences within each general category of influences rated as definite influences to discontinue studies are listed in Table 6 below here.

Table 6: Percentages of respondents who rated specific items as definite influences to discontinue their study, within general categories of influence

General category of influence	Specific influence	% of respondents who rated the influence as a definite influence to discontinue
General environment of student	other demands on time, besides studying	45
	advice or opinion from friends or other USQ students (not including family)	41
General interaction between the student and the university	feelings about 'belonging' or 'not belonging' to the University community	33
Individual student characteristics	ability or inability to remember information	34
	general study-management skills, such as time-management and planning and scheduling the study program	28
Interaction between student and teaching staff	no items	-
Course and study materials design and content	not knowing what was required to obtain a pass in the course(s)	30

The following list of definite influences to discontinue, from the most commonly reported to the least commonly reported by the respondents, was derived from the data in Table 6:

- General environment of student
 - Demands on time, besides studying
 - Advice or opinion from friends or other USQ students (not including family)
- Individual student characteristics
 - Inability to remember information
- General interaction between the student and the university
 - Feeling of not belonging to the University community
- Course and study materials design and content
 - Not knowing what was required to obtain a pass in the course(s)
- Individual student characteristics
 - General study-management skills, such as time-management and planning and scheduling the study program

Discussion and recommendations

The findings reported in this paper may be indicative of types of definite influences to discontinue study most commonly experienced by TPP students. These types of influences include general personal environmental circumstances, individual characteristics of the student, interactions between the student and the University, and the design of the course and/or the study materials. Within these general types of influences, only a few specific influences, such as demands on the student's time and the student's ability to remember information, seem to be commonly perceived by students to be definite influences.

The general type of influence to discontinue study most commonly perceived by the respondents was the student's general personal environment. This is a general type of influence over which USQ would seem to have no control. The assumptions sometimes made by university senior managers, that student non-progression generally results from student dissatisfaction with teaching, and that it can be greatly reduced by improving teaching-learning practices, are not supported by the evidence presented here. However, the other commonly perceived influences seem to be potentially amenable to some mitigation by actions that could be taken by the University. Teaching strategies aimed at assisting students to improve their memory skills and their study-management skills may be able to be made more effective. These skills were taught, and student achievement of them was progressively assessed, in the course in which all students in the sample were enrolled. Evidently, the teaching of these skills in the course was less than fully effective for at least approximately 30% of students in the sample group. The influence of not knowing what was required to obtain a pass in the course seems amenable to mitigation by enhanced communication with the students. Information about the requirements was very detailed and was made very explicit in the distance education materials. However, evidently the communication of this information was apparently ineffective for at least 30% of the respondents. There was an indication in the interpreted data that USQ was not fully effective in assisting at least 33% of the respondents to identify as belonging to the University community. There seems to be a need for USQ to adopt strategies to address this perception in order to enhance retention rates of distance education TPP students.

Considerable limitations apply to the applicability of findings presented in this paper to the development of policy or practice aimed at enhancing the retention of TPP students. The arbitrary limitation of identifying specific definite influences as those reported by at least 25% of students has resulted in a coarse interpretation of the data, which disregarded other possibly important specific influences that were reported by smaller percentages of students. The findings do not give an indication of the influences that were experienced by individuals or by particular groups such as prisoners, as they were based on coarsely aggregated data. Data from students who did not progress with study could not be separated from data from

those who successfully completed the course, thus the representativeness of the data sample across the whole student group could not be determined. As the questionnaire was mailed to students near the end of each semester, there seems to be a distinct probability that the majority of respondents were students who completed the course. The data sample was a small proportion (11%) of the total student enrolments in the course, thus limiting the generalisability of the findings.

The findings reported here regarding distance education TPP students' perceptions contrast with some of the findings of Taylor and Bedford (2004) regarding USQ teaching staff perceptions of factors related to distance education undergraduate student non-completion of study. Whereas the student respondents in the study most frequently identified particular personal environmental factors as influences to discontinue, teaching staff most frequently perceived that the major set of factors contributing to student non-completion consisted of student individual characteristics (Taylor & Bedford, 2004, p. 390). The particular student individual characteristics identified in the Taylor and Bedford (2004) study were level of preparedness, motivation, and ability to manage study.

Mismatch between university and student expectations was perceived by teaching staff to be another important factor (Taylor & Bedford, 2004, p. 390). However, the data gathered from students in the study reported here indicates that less than 25% of the student respondents perceived mismatches between the University's expectations and their expectations to be a definite influence to discontinue. (The average percentage for questionnaire items relating to the match or mismatch between the University's expectations and students' expectations was approximately 16.)

Perceptions of the influence of course design, and of the general interaction between the student and the university, differed between the study reported here and the study reported by Taylor and Bedford (2004). Thirty per cent of TPP student respondents identified a definite influence related to course design, whereas teaching staff did not regard course design as an important factor (Taylor & Bedford, 2004, p. 390). Similarly, whereas 33% of TPP student respondents identified a definite influence related to student-university interaction, teaching staff generally did not perceive this interaction to be a significant factor (Taylor & Bedford, 2004, p. 383).

The findings reported in this paper were not directly comparable with the findings of Taylor and Bedford (2004), as they were derived from data pertaining to students whose group general characteristics seem likely to be different from those of undergraduate students. However, the findings appear to indicate that there are some differences in the perceptions of the students and those of the teachers regarding the influences to discontinue study. If this was the case, strategies adopted by staff to reduce student discontinuation rates, without taking account of student perceptions, would probably be less than optimally

effective. In the particular situation described here, for example, if teachers give priority to taking action to address the matter of student individual characteristics, such as those relating to motivation to study, while the students perceive that lack of time for study is the main reason for discontinuing, the action taken by the teachers would seem likely to be less than optimally effective in reducing the rate of discontinuation of study

There appeared to be some concordance between the TPP students' perceptions and the university teachers' perceptions relating to the influence of students' general study skills. Twenty-eight per cent of the students in the study sample identified some lack of general study-management skills as a definite influence to discontinue their study. The majority of teachers in the Bedford and Taylor (2004) study identified student's general study skills as a major factor that contributed to undergraduate students' non-completion of study (Taylor & Bedford, 2004, p. 383).

Considering the limitations of the study reported here regarding the representativeness of the data collected, a follow-up study with TPP distance education students is recommended. In the second study, the questionnaires should be coded so that membership of particular sub-groups could be identified from the returned questionnaire. This procedure would enable a more detailed analysis of data to be carried out, for example to investigate whether perceived influences to discontinue study vary between sub-groups such as prisoner students, students who discontinued their study at an early stage of the semester, and students who completed the course. The procedure would enable identification of the representativeness of the data across the various sub-groups. The representativeness of the data in the second study might be enhanced by sending the questionnaire to students as close as possible to the date after which they apparently had discontinued active participation in the course.

The comparisons made between the students' perceptions and the teachers' perceptions indicate that a study similar to that proposed as a follow-up to the TPP study reported here should be undertaken with USQ undergraduate students. This study would provide data on whether there are major differences in the perceptions of undergraduate students and their teachers regarding factors that influence undergraduate students to discontinue their studies. In any case, USQ teachers should be made aware of the findings of the studies recommended here so that students' perceptions can be taken into consideration in the development of USQ policies and practices relating to increasing the retention rates of distance education students.

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