

2018

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10.1080/07294360.2018.1455645

Kirk, G. (2018). Retention in a Bachelor of Education (Early childhood studies) course: students say why they stay and others leave. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 37 (4), 773-787. Available [here](#)

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Retention in a Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood studies) Course: Students say why they stay and others leave

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The literature suggests that student attrition at the university level has been of growing concern in many countries. Student attrition has a number of implications for Universities, chief amongst them are losses to revenue and investment in higher education. While many studies have examined causes for attrition from an institutional perspective, this study examines how the Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood studies) that sits within the School of Education can support the retention of students from the students' perspectives. Using a qualitative methodology that recorded up to 40 hours of interviews with 20 students provided insights into why they stay at university and what aspects of the early childhood studies degree support them in staying. Conversely, the students also comment on those aspects that are not supportive and could impact on retention. The data revealed that a sense of belonging was very important and that particular course specific activities at certain times supported developing this belonging. The students identified the importance of a mentorship program and how this program needs to be made available from the commencement of their course. Other factors contributing to retention included well-placed practicums, career choice, designated study times, as well as study groups and supportive and responsive lecturers.

Keywords: higher education; retention; attrition; student perspectives, Early Childhood studies

Introduction

In 2010, a newspaper article in *The Australian* reported that in Australian universities student attrition cost of more than \$1.4 billion a year, which is an average of \$36 million per institution (Hare, 2010). In this same article, education consultant Tony Adams claimed that "The salient lesson for universities is that it is much cheaper to retain a student than recruit a new one." The fees paid by students contribute to the running of the university, however, the distribution of this funding has recently come under scrutiny. The Australian government has called for more transparency in university spending, claiming that monies raised for teaching are not being directed toward the teaching at the expected rate.

The Grattan Institute (Norton & Cherastidtham, 2015) confirmed that some of the finances raised were used to fund research, because of a growing number of unsuccessful applications for research grants. Ironically, to attract students, universities need to consider their position in research-driven global university rankings. Therefore, due to the inaccessibility of grants, universities fund some research through student fees intended for

teaching. Universities need students, and although there is greater financial return in retaining them than recruiting them, universities still need to attract students.

This study focused on the Bachelor of Education (Early childhood studies) course (Y42) at Edith Cowan University (ECU) and gathered data from 20 students from first to third-year. Reasons for attrition based on the ECU Data Warehouse figures are discussed. This study provides a different perspective on retention, in that it considers students' thoughts specific to a particular course. With few exceptions, most studies look at attrition from a university perspective, and most examine reasons for attrition rather than retention. The study also considered patterns of attrition in the Y42 course over a five-year period; this data are used to support the data from the interviews. This will add to the literature examining student perspectives on retention.

Literature Review

In 2010, the overall Australian institutions completion rate of a degree within a four-year timeframe was 45.1%. However, of the 2010 cohort, 79.8% were defined as still enrolled with many students completing their degree over a period of nine years (Department of Education and Training, 2017). Nine years was reported as the more common timeframe in which students completed their degree.

Comparatively, in 2010 40% of the ECU cohort of students completed a degree in four years. Over nine years, that is from 2005-2013 there was a 63.5% completion rate and a 63.2% completion rate from 2006-2014. Both the former and latter figures ranked ECU as third out of the four leading Western Australian Universities in completion rates (Department of Education and Training, 2017). Statistics from the in ECU Data Warehouse (2016) reports that in 2016 the retention rate for students enrolled at ECU, reached 85%. The retention rate at this time for students enrolled in the Y42 degree was slightly lower at 82%.

Student attrition has a number of implications for universities, chief amongst them are losses to revenue and investment in higher education (O'Keeffe, 2013). Collectively the literature has identified a diverse range of factors that can be predictive of student attrition. These include: type of attendance, age – with older students less likely than younger students to complete their studies, and Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) score (Department of Education and Training, 2017). Additionally, the literature cites good career choices, competent academic staff, sufficient support, a comprehensive retention strategy at institutional or faculty level, academic preparedness, motivation and student engagement (Viljoen & Deacon, 2013) and motivation and ability as reasons for retention (Alarcon & Edwards, 2013).

The most commonly cited cause for retention in higher education courses is a sense of belonging (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; O'Keeffe, 2013). The literature suggests that even online students cite a sense of belonging as an attribute to their course retention (Kizilcec & Halawa, 2015). Boath et al., (2016) examined the potential of pastoral text messages sent to students in contributing to retention. These authors found that the students ($n=25$) who replied to their Qualtrics questionnaire considered that the text messages increased their sense of belonging and contributed to them staying in the course. They concluded that text messaging may be a useful addition to approaches to improve undergraduate student retention rates.

A recent report conducted by the Higher Education Standards Panel (2017) dismissed factors such as low ATAR scores as predictive of attrition; rather, they contributed student

retention to students paying a greater contribution of the cost of their course, with assistance from income contingent loans. Pitman, Koshy and Philimore (2014) concur that students with lower levels of academic achievement entering higher education does not necessarily equate to attrition. In contrast, in their study in the years that there was a widening of university access to these students (2009-2011), there was an increase in retention.

The Higher Education Standards Panel (2017) referred to findings from a La Trobe University study which cited reasons for attrition as personal, including physical or mental health issues, financial pressures and other reasons often beyond institutional control (Harvey, Szalkowicz, & Luckman, 2017). Additionally, Harvey et al., (2017) indicated that school leavers and low socioeconomic students were more likely to make less informed choices about career choice, and are hence more likely to withdraw. Similarly, a study on attrition in nursing found that those students who selected nursing as their first preference were twice as likely to complete the course. This study also found that students who were employed in nurse related work were more likely to complete their course, concluding that understanding career choice supports retention (Salamonson et al., 2014).

Other studies have recommended ways to retain students at university, in particular the seminal author on retention, Tinto (1999). Recommendations suggested by Tinto included setting high and clear expectations of students, improving the quality of academic and social support for students, improving the quality of feedback to students, providing opportunity for the academic and social inclusion of students within the university, and generally improving the quality of learning and teaching. However, Beer and Lawson (2017) contend that to an extent, the reasons for attrition have been oversimplified, citing attrition as a “complex, non-linear problem” (p. 780). Rather than a singular reason, these authors propose that there is often a combination of factors that contribute to students’ decisions to withdraw; rather than a single factor. They suggested that because the combinations tended to be unique and agile, that institutional preventions to attrition should be “complex adaptive systems” (p. 781). Retaining traditional problem-solving models would continue to be ineffective whereas a problem solving approach based on agility and collaboration is more likely to be successful. In parallel, Greenland and Moore (2014) suggest that preventions be adapted to the stage the students are at in their studies.

Observing retention from a school/faculty perspective, Maher and Macallister (2013) reported the changes made in the school of education at an Australian university, Notre Dame, they state have reduced attrition. These changes included: individual admissions interviews; provision of an Associate Dean Pastoral Care; course coordinators providing continuity of support; accessibility of academic staff; well-supported, extended practical experiences; senior staff lecturing undergraduates; congruence between co-curricular supports and the educational framework, and comprehensive mentoring of new students. The authors claim that the implementation of these changes led to an attrition of five to eight percent in education in Notre Dame, compared with the education sector in Australia of 18 percent.

From another perspective, La Trobe University highlighted that while it is often difficult to prevent students from withdrawing, it is relatively easy to support their re-enrolment. Harvey et al., (2017) found that 50% of students who started a degree and left are more likely to return within eight years of their initial withdrawal, and that this re-recruitment is achieved with little institutional effort. Earlier in this review it was noted that most degree

completions occur within nine years. While there are multiple reasons for this, it is likely that this finding by Harvey et al. forms one of them.

This literature review has highlighted that attrition is a concern for universities. Some sources contend however, that the problem of attrition has been over sensationalised and that in reality, attrition has not really changed (Beer & Lawson, 2017; Higher Education Standards Panel, 2017). This review has identified causes for attrition (e.g. Alarcon & Edwards, 2013; O’Keeffe, 2013) and that it is not sufficient to attribute attrition to a single cause. Rather, attrition is more likely to be a combination of causes that many universities exit analyses tend not to capture (Beer & Lawson, 2017). It has also been suggested in this review that re-recruitment is more viable than preventing student attrition (Harvey et al., 2017). Finally, this review has indicated strategies that are either recommended or have worked at other universities to support student retention (Maher & Macallister, 2013). Most of these studies have observed attrition from an institutional focus, this current study will add to this literature by offering the perspective of a course within a faculty (school) at university. Moreover, this study will provide recommendations from the students’ points of view.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to examine student perspectives on how the university could retain students in the Y42 course. To answer this question a qualitative methodological approach was adopted to enable an examination of students’ perceptions on the causes of retention and attrition. In particular, a phenomenological approach was utilised as it is based on peoples’ construction of reality, and it is the students’ voices that are central to this study. In line with this approach, students were given as little direction as possible (see questions below), but were encouraged to provide full descriptions of their experiences. While the intention was to examine retention, it was also useful to examine reasons given for attrition. Accordingly, data on student attrition in the Y42 course was also investigated. Ethics was approved through ECU.

Research instruments

Data for this study were collected using an analysis of attrition data collected by the university (ECU Data Warehouse, 2016) and interviews conducted with students. The attrition data enabled an examination of previous student attrition patterns in the Y42 course over a five-year period.

The interviews were used as the main method of data collection. Interviews provide a context in which any unexpected data may emerge and provide insights into the participants’ perceptions and student retention (Peters & Halcomb, 2014). Students were interviewed over a two-month period with the interviews taking between one to two hours with each student. All but two students were interviewed singularly, and only once over the data collection period. There were three broad questions asked of all students:

“Can you tell me why you feel you remain in your course?”

“Can you tell me why you think you will remain enrolled in your course?” and

“Why do you think some students withdraw from this course?”

Broad questions were asked so as to not to lead the participants to respond in a preordained way while giving them space to examine their own thoughts and feelings.

Data analysis

The data were analysed through the identification of patterns for retention and/or attrition provided by both data collection tools and the literature. These patterns were categorised in terms of consistency, relevance to each other and whether or not a preventative measure would be effective or if the reason for leaving was inevitable. The data were discussed based on these patterns.

Participants

All students from first to third-year were invited to participate in this study via email. Thirty students returned the consent form, and 20 of these participants were later interviewed. Participants were selected only on the basis of their availability for interview during the data collection period.

The participants were all female, aged between 18 and 63 years. Only two entered university as school applicants (ATAR) and both held an excellence scholarship. Twelve students were in first-year, four second-year and four third-year. Two participants studied online; one lived in regional Western Australia, while the other was a full fee paying student and had to couple her studies with work. Three students were enrolled part-time. Six of the 20 students had been previously enrolled in other courses, and five of these students had discontinued in some or all previously enrolled courses.

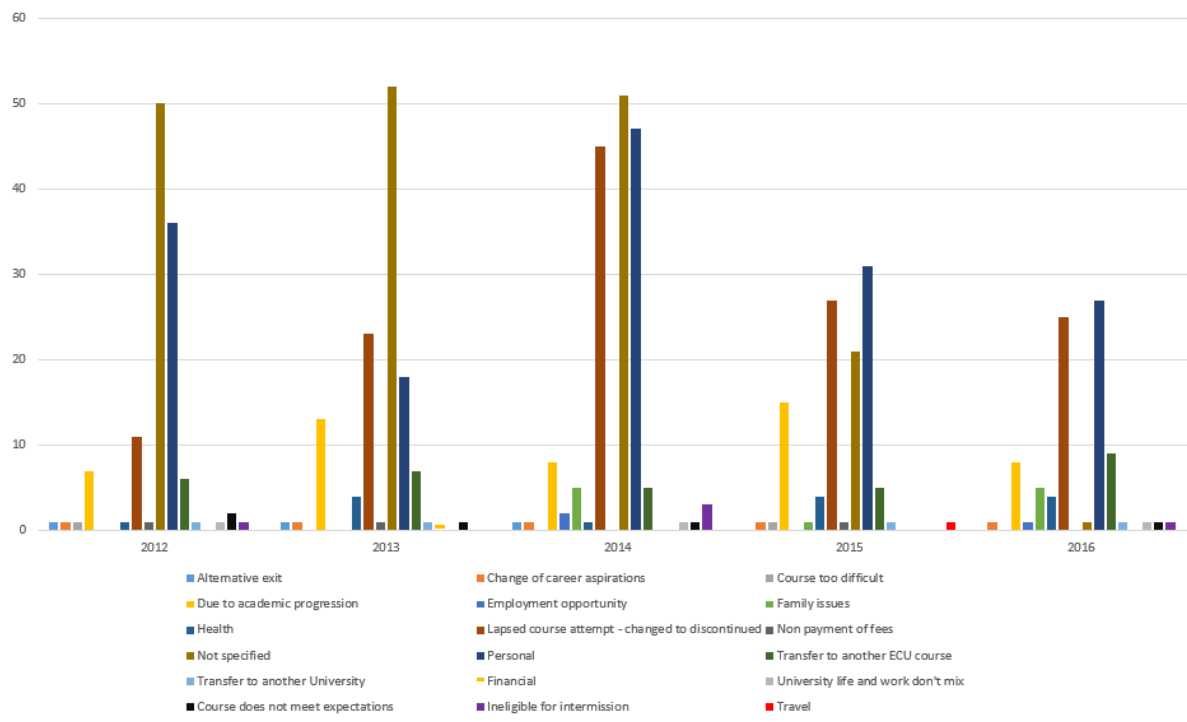
Findings and Discussion

ECU Data Warehouse

Analysis of the attrition data (ECU Data Warehouse, 2016) revealed that from 2012 to 2014 the most common reason for withdrawal from the Y42 course was 'not specified' and between 2015 and 2016 this was superseded by 'personal reasons' (see Figure 1). Personal reasons are consistent with the reasons for attrition cited in the literature (e.g. Harvey et al., 2017; O'Keeffe, 2013).

The data also revealed that a 'lapsed course attempt' was a consistently high factor for attrition over the five years. Reasons why students leave a course without formally submitting a request to defer from their studies could range from personal, to an unawareness of university protocol to a sense of apathy. The latter is in contradiction to the Higher Education Standards Panel (2017) assumption that attrition is less likely to occur when students pay a greater contribution of the cost of their course.

Figure 1: Reasons for attrition from the Y42 course.



(Source: ECU Data Warehouse, 2016)

The literature reported that mature-aged students were more likely to withdraw due to family issues. While this is evident in the Y42 attrition data, it is not a dominant reason for attrition (representing five students in both 2014 and 2016, and one in 2015). While universities can offer some support to students with family obligations, it could be argued that family issues qualify as what Harvey et al. (2017) labelled inevitable. However, as family dynamics change over time, it is also more likely that this demographic will return to study at a more convenient time.

On average, the data reported here states that 10 students per year withdraw due to academic progression. This means that the students have failed a unit three times and/or they have failed a designated unit (Y42 practicum placements are designated units). This could be categorised under the motivation and student engagement cited by Viljoen and Deacon (2013) and to some degree could be prevented with appropriate university support. However, this can also be regarded as inevitable as some students, even with support, fail to negotiate the course content.

Specifically, the Y42 attrition data did not state a lack of sense of belonging as a reason for attrition, but could be implied in the more generic reasons for withdrawal such as ‘personal’ or even ‘not specified’. Generally, the data did indicate that the overall amount of students withdrawing from the Y42 course between 2015 to 2016 had declined from previous years.

While informative, this data does not indicate the association between students’ ATAR and retention, nor does it specify the support services these students accessed before withdrawing from the course. Additionally, it is assumed that the reason of ‘family issues’ relates to mature aged students, but this is inferred and not stated. This data can only represent singular causes for attrition and any combinations are masked behind broad terms such as ‘personal’ (Beer & Lawson, 2017).

Student accounts for student retention

This section reports the findings from the interviews. The students' perspectives on retention are discussed in reference to both the literature and the ECU attrition data (2016). All names used are pseudonyms. This section is organised under the following concepts: students who re-enrol to study after withdrawing; mature-aged students and family issues; students entering university with an ATAR; online students; sense of belonging; semester timetables; career choice; practicum, financial pressures including university fees and resilience.

Re-enrolling students.

Harvey et al. (2017) argued that 50% of students who withdrew, returned to study within an eight-year period. This study was completed at an institution level, when examining these findings at course level whether students return to the same course or a different one comes under consideration. In the current study, six of the 20 participating students had been previously enrolled in other courses. Only two of these students had previously been enrolled in Early Childhood, of these two, one had been enrolled at another university. All the other students had attempted different courses until they enrolled in the Y42 course. While a small sample to provide comparisons, of this group of six only 33.33% of students returned to an Early childhood degree and 16.67% returned to an Early childhood degree at ECU. The percentage of students from this cohort returning to a different degree was 66.67%, which is commensurate with the 50% cited by Harvey et al. (2017) at the institutional level.

Mature-aged students, family and finances.

The Department of Education and Training (2017) stated that mature-aged students were more likely to withdraw than younger students due to home commitments. Of the 20 students interviewed, 18 students are considered 'mature-aged'. Indeed, having a family to care for did add extra responsibilities, however, most of the parents interviewed felt they were more likely to remain in the course to provide a good example for their children. Added pressure seemed to arise from additional responsibility, particularly at crucial times (e.g. assignment time). For example, one student, Sally (first-year), was contending with a close relative's terminal illness and her husband going away to work:

"It hasn't been easy.... and I'm just like, "Okay, don't know where I'm going, I've got assignments due," and I'm like, "Okay." So I'm trying to just deal with that and then go, "Right, done that, now I need to get going and get my assignments done."

None of the students interviewed considered finances to be an obstacle to their course completion. One student, Annie (third-year) stated that the fees were "*par for the course*" and accepted she had to sacrifice before being able to make money. Another student, Penny (first-year) stated it was finances that made her enrol in the Y42 course. She was currently a single mum who had been working in childcare. Penny said that with the after school fees and school tuition fees for her oldest child and childcare for her younger two (twins), she could not keep working in a job outside of school hours. Penny used this as incentive to persevere in her studies saying "*I don't really have a choice at the moment, because if I do end my studies here, then I'm going to go back to the lifestyle where I pretty much will not have money for anything for the kids, and that's not what I want*".

School leavers (ATAR entry).

Two of the participants enrolled at university through the ATAR entry pathway. Both students held scholarships due to high ATAR scores, thus disqualifying them from the low ATAR reason for attrition as cited by the Department of Education and Training (2017). However, the interviews revealed other factors to be considered for these students. One student, Nikaya (second-year) always had teaching as her first career choice, but when she was in Year 10 the school counsellor told her “... *you are wasting your talent being a teacher.*”

As a high achiever, when Nikaya received a lower than her average score a few days before the interview for this study took place, she was demoralised. She said that she had never felt so demotivated and it took her support group (a group of peers she met in first year) to talk her into feeling positive again. Nikaya said she had nominated her interest in having a mentor when she enrolled and was contacted in week seven by the mentorship program. By this time, she saw no need to continue with them.

The other scholarship student, Mandy (first-year) had a different journey. Mandy did not know what she wanted to do for a career and was told by her mum to become a teacher. She commented that she has stopped telling people what course she is doing because she was sick of hearing the comment “... *but I thought you were smart*”. Mandy then continued to say that she was surprised at how complex the content was and that she had to work to keep up.

Mandy had begun to form peer support networks, but commented that a mentor would have been beneficial in those early few weeks/months. Mandy said she had questioned herself when the pressures of assignments came in, and would have benefited from someone (a mentor) telling her that her responses were normal. Mandy said she had not been offered the possibility of having a mentor and that she had also applied to Notre Dame University and was contacted by a mentor even before accepting their offer.

The interviews with both these students raised two issues for retention. First, the need for a support group and/or mentoring. Disappointment or pressure of some sort can occur at any time and support from others at this time could be critical for some. While the university does have a mentorship program, the students need to be contacted as early as possible to provide optimum support. Susan (third-year) said that she had volunteered to be a mentor and received notification that she had 20 mentees. She emailed them all, but only two contacted her back. Susan said she sent the emails out when she received the names in around week five. It is possible that the timing was too late and an email should have been sent out prior to commencement as described by Mandy about her Notre Dame mentor.

Second, there is a need to raise the profile of teachers within the wider community. It is suggested that a higher profile for teaching will also attract more students. Currently ECU has raised the ATAR entrance level to 70, however, as most Y42 students enter the program from an alternative entry pathway, this is something that still needs review. Raising the profile for Y42 can emerge through many efforts, chief amongst them students and staff challenging any misconceptions held by the public and through research.

Online students.

Two participating students were online. For one, Jess (first-year), a peer support group was very helpful. Jess lives in regional Western Australia and thanks to the student introduction section in one of her units, she found someone within an hour's drive that she could meet up with. Jess found the isolation hard and appreciated the opportunities made for peer and tutor

interaction via ADOBE connect (conferencing software), stating that “*As such a remote student, it is so helpful to be able to participate in live group sessions*”.

The other student, Amanda (third-year) chose the online mode of study because she had to work. Amanda had to pay her fees upfront and it was for this reason that she also chose to study part-time. Amanda commented that the compassion she received from some tutors/lecturers has supported her retention in the Y42 course.

Sense of belonging.

Most students stated that they needed to feel connected with at least one other person. It was through this connection that they gained the support they needed to continue with their course. O’Keeffe (2013) refers to this as a sense of belonging, and this concept of belonging featured strongly throughout the interviews, even though not stated as a reason in the ECU attrition data (2016). One student commented that the person she felt connected with was one of her tutors. She recalled the time when her connection with this tutor prevented her from withdrawing “*I freak about the assignments, and I’ve nearly dropped out, I think week three, so before the cut-off, I almost did, I turned up tears, absolute mess, hadn’t slept the night before, just thinking I couldn’t do it ... luckily, I had Alison that morning*”.

Other students formed support groups with their peers and this was made possible by two avenues. The first, and most commonly cited avenue, was the drama assignment the students had to do in their first year, first semester. This assignment required the students to work in groups, and many of the students formed firm friendships from this. Nikaya (ATAR student) was one of them, she commented that in the “*drama unit, a group of about five of us, got really, really, close, and that carried on*” - the peer support group she referred to was formed from this group.

The second avenue mentioned was during lectures. Sally, mentioned earlier, said that when she entered her first lectures, she would try to find another mature-aged person to sit next to. While she said they exchanged salutations, she said the ice was broken when “*they [lecturers] say speak to the person next to you and discuss this, or in those regards, and I think it just sort of gradually went on from there*”. She has remained friends with the first person she did this with, and attributes this friendship to providing her with her sense of belonging. The friendships that the students formed not only provided emotional support, but also academic support. Many of the students formed study groups and a number of the students interviewed spoke of set times that their study group met.

Semester timetables.

This topic has two perspectives. The first is the lecture/tutorial timetable and the second refers more to the length and content of the semester. In regards to the first perspective, a number of the students suggested that the way their lectures and tutorials were timetabled supported their retention. Rebecca (third-year) explained that in her first year she had missed the opportunity to get the tutorial immediately after her lecture, which is often the preferred choice. Therefore, she was forced to go to the library to wait for the later tutorial. She said that she utilised this time to do all her readings and commence her assignments. Because she found this so beneficial, she now deliberately enrolls in the later tutorials and contributes this ‘forced’ study time to both her success and retention in the Y42 course. Many of the students interviewed met

with their study group at a dedicated time. Either way, study time had the capacity to benefit the students twofold: It supported their study and enabled another forum in which to consolidate their support groups.

Second, two students in particular talked about the 13-week semesters (compared with the 10 week semesters). Nikaya, stated that a 13-week semester with no practicum or distributed practicum days to break it up was arduous and demotivating. The other student, Annie (third-year) stated that the only time she has seriously considered withdrawing was in second year when this practicum was placed in the middle of the semester and she had to return to university when it finished to complete the rest of her units. This second-year practicum has since been moved to the end of semester.

Career choice.

For the five years represented in Figure 1 (ECU data warehouse, 2016) there was one person each year who withdrew to pursue another course. Harvey et al., (2017) attributed indecision about career choice to school leavers and low socioeconomic students who were more likely to make less informed choices. Of the students interviewed, only two were not sure of their career choice, one happened to be a school leaver, Mandy, and the other, Candice (second year) was from a low socioeconomic background. However, it was not that they were less informed about the Y42 course, it was more so that they were told the Y42 course would be a good option for them. In Candice's case, she had previously been enrolled in acting but was persuaded to do teaching by her parents who wanted her to pursue a career with a more stable income.

All the other students interviewed were certain of their career choice, most of whom had experience working in childcare, or like Deslie (first-year) special needs. Deslie began her career in special needs as a mature-aged student. After working as a special needs assistant for many years, her children told her it was time to do teaching and when she did she "*absolutely love[d] it*". Knowing what you want to do makes obstacles less insurmountable, and it is because of this knowing that these students felt they would remain in the Y42 course. According to Salamonson et al.'s (2014) study it was found that those students employed in career orientated jobs were more likely to complete their degree.

Practicum.

The students' views toward practicum were largely positive. Candice (first-year) moved from another university to study at ECU because of the amount of practicum and that the practicum started from first year. Leslie (second-year) stated "*I have heard that some unis don't do practicum until like second-year, or third-year, or something, and that's just insane...I think it's really clever how you have the practicum at the beginning of first-year, first semester you have a day in the classroom, to see if ... to give you a little bit of a taste of whether you might like it, or not*". Nikaya described the practicum placements as a time to reaffirm that is why you are studying and welcomed each experience with enthusiasm. Rebecca (third-year) even gained her current job from her first year childcare practicum and plans to continue working there when she graduates.

Mandy, however, found her first practicum experience challenging and stated it had caused her to question her commitment. She said that the reason why she was not enjoying the course was because of her practicum. Mandy had been placed at a Language Development

Centre for one day a week and explained her experiences consisted of being asked to “...*sit on the mat for an hour with him and build some blocks,*” and when she did, the children threw blocks at her. Penny too found the distributed day (one day a week for five weeks in first year, first semester) difficult to manage with the rest of her studies. The day allocated to the distributed day had previously been her day without her twins and she relied on this time for study. These two examples were more the exception than the rule.

Pressures and resilience.

All the students interviewed considered themselves resilient, and while they understood the pressures of assessment points were inevitable, most commented on the difficulty of assignments being due around the same time. Students such as Nikaya and Sally stated that they found it difficult to attempt two or more assignments at a time; both tried to work out which one they can start earlier to spread out the load. Sometimes this did not work because the content needed for the assignment had not been covered. Other pressures, including personal issues such as those previously stated for Sally, made this pressured time even more intense. While the unit coordinators for each year make a concerted effort to spread the assignment due dates out, the two assessment point requirement put in place by the university makes it difficult to create more space between assessment and assessment points.

Recommendations

While the following recommendations have been tailored to the Y42 course, many suggestions will also support student retention in other courses. Recommendations include orchestrating opportunities for students to connect; promoting dedicated study times; reaffirming career choice and timing of assessments. The following elaborates.

Orchestrating opportunities for students to connect

The most dominant factor mentioned by students in the interviews was a sense of belonging. Equally, a poor sense of belonging could have attributed to the high ‘not specified’ and ‘personal’ scores on the ECU attrition data (2016). There were a number of features in the Y42 course that students felt supported their belonging such as the collaborative drama assignment in first year, first semester and lecturers encouraging students to share their thoughts in nonthreatening environments. Therefore, the continuation of these practices are recommended. It was also noted that online students benefit from times to connect with other students in an immediate and interactive way. Therefore, regularly timed and purposeful opportunities to connect for online students through online resources such as ADOBE connect are also recommended to encourage students sense of belonging.

One feature that the students felt needed developing in regards to supporting a sense of belonging was the mentorship program. This program needs to target new students as soon as they start at university, not in weeks four, five or after (Maher & Macallister, 2013). There are two recommendations to support this effort. The first is to allocate mentees to mentors at the point of enrolment enabling the contact between the two occur before the mentees first day. The second is for the mentors to arrange to meet their mentees at the orientation and to use that time to introduce themselves and show them around the university. In reference to this latter point, when other students see the mentors, they may elect to become involved in the mentorship program.

Finally, when lecturers connect with students they are in a better position to provide complex adaptive systems that respond with agility to students' differing and changing needs (Beer & Lawson, 2017; Greenland & Moore, 2014). Beer and Lawson (2017) suggest that interventions are supportive only when they adapt to the students' needs.

Promotion of dedicated study times

Many students interviewed attribute their retention to academic success, providing momentum to their studies. Poor academic progression was a consistent factor attributing to attrition according to the ECU attrition data (2016).

Some students found out by accident the benefits of having a dedicated study time. While these students found out their own way when they were forced to wait a few hours between their lecture and tutorial, it is recommended that the benefits of a dedicated study time be stated explicitly to incoming students. Many of the students interviewed further benefited from having a study group, this is also something that the students should be explicitly informed about. This latter recommendation also serves to support students sense of belonging.

Reaffirming career choices

The ECU attrition data (2016) states that there are a consistent, all be it low number of students who leave university due to change of career aspirations, or the course does not meet expectations, or they transfer to another ECU course. All these indicate the wrong career choice.

The interviewees stated that they were attracted to ECU because of the amount of practical experience offered, and that it was offered from first year. This formed one of the reasons why they continued with their studies as it reminded them of the reason why they chose to work with young children. It is recommended that the practicum offerings remain the same and not decrease in availability. Practicum remains an avenue of affirming career choice.

From another perspective, it is recommended that early childhood is promoted in high schools as a career option and that the students are made aware of what is involved in the course. Informing students of the academic rigor involved in doing a degree in the Y42 at this early stage will potentially forewarn students of the complexity of the course as well as work to raise the profile of the profession.

Timing of assessment points

Students expressed how difficult it was to complete four major assignments in a concentrated period. The reason why so many assignments fall near the same time is that the Y42 course has only two points for assessment. Therefore, the four core units (or topics) tend to have an assignment (usually around 50 or 60% of the overall mark) and an exam (usually around 50 or 40%).

It is recommended that the Y42 course provides more points for assessment. This will facilitate earlier assessments that can be formative while enabling the distribution of assessments throughout the semester. Formative assessments enable learning through assessment, and as such are the preferred way of assessing students. More assessments also mean that students are not working on four 60% assignments all near the same time. The lighter weighting on each

assessment point, also means that students can redeem their marks if they achieve one poor mark.

Conclusion

It is concluded from the literature that students are more likely to leave the Y42 course due to a combination of causes, not just the singular ones itemised in the ECU attrition data (2016). However this data does provide a good indication of the variances in the student reasons for attrition, and the five year span discussed in the study demonstrates that not every year will yield identical reasons. It is interesting to note that the sense of belonging cited more often in the literature and through the interviews was not explicitly given as a reason for leaving in the ECU attrition dataset.

The overall recommendation from this study concurs with Beer and Lawson (2017) in that while there are some preventions to retention that remain ever present, others need to be dynamic and in tune with student needs at the time. Therefore, it is an agile process that is characterised by constant revision, problem solving and immediate action.

Although data were collected from students from first to third year, there were not as many second and third years participating to make any firm comparisons. It is suggested that this be a topic for further research where a more comparative representation of year levels are examined. Additionally, further studies on retention of online students would be beneficial as this mode of study tends to have the higher rate of attrition.

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