Contextualising student engagement: Orientation and beyond in teacher education

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Abstract

The first year of higher education is particularly significant in influencing students’ ongoing success in and experience of university, and also as it is the time when students are most likely to fail academically, and most at risk financially, socially, emotionally, and physically. Further, the first few weeks at university have implications for the long-term persistence and engagement of students with their studies. This paper discusses four key challenges to student engagement in university, with a specific focus on how these challenges relate to teacher education. It then describes how the Faculty of Education at the University of Tasmania sought to address these challenges in practice through the development of a week-long orientation program, linked to ongoing academic and social support. Preliminary outcomes of this project are also discussed.

Introduction

The first year of study in higher education has been the subject of research in Australia for over 50 years (Hillman, 2005; McInnis, 2001). This research has established that the first year is significant not only in predicting students’ ongoing success in and experience of tertiary education, but also as it is the year in which students are at their most vulnerable in terms of the likelihood of academic failure, and most at risk of social, emotional, health, and financial problems (McInnis, 2001). Indeed, 1999 statistics showed that one third of all students who enter university in Australia fail to graduate, and approximately half of those who withdraw do so in their first year (DETYA, 2000, cited in Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001). For these reasons, programs and research that attempt to enhance the experience of first year students are more significant than ever.

It is important that universities address the range of issues which present potential challenges to students’ academic, social, and personal engagement in study not only within the first year, but also within the initial transition to tertiary study. The first few weeks at university, when students are involved in this transition, have important implications for the long-term persistence of students (Macdonald, 1995; Erskine, 2000). The issue of student engagement with higher education is therefore of crucial importance in ensuring students are successful in integrating with their new community of study.

This paper discusses four key challenges to student engagement in university – specifically challenges related to studying Education – then describes how the Faculty of Education at the University of Tasmania (UTAS) sought to address those challenges in practice, through the development and implementation of a week-long orientation program. Preliminary outcomes of this program are also discussed.

Challenges to engagement in teacher education
Current research indicates that far from being a simple issue to resolve, engaging students in higher education, both academically and socially, can be problematic. Further, these problems are increasing, as evidenced by a decrease in the level of engagement with university life (McInnis & James, 1995; McInnis, James & Hartley, 2000). This is most clearly indicated through the increase in the number of students working part-time while studying and an accompanying increase in the average number of hours worked each week, resulting in less time available to spend on campus. Related to this are key challenges of the changing patterns of attendance and participation in the social environment of the university, addressing the diversity in levels of beginning students’ academic preparation, and encouraging students to develop an understanding of the multiple roles they will need to adopt in studying a professional discipline such as teaching. These challenges will be addressed in turn.

Perhaps the most significant challenge in terms of student engagement relates to finding the balance between study commitments and part-time work faced by an increasing number of students. In the McInnis and James surveys (McInnis & James, 1995; McInnis et al, 2000), it was noted that the most striking difference between the two cohorts was the increase in the average number of hours per week that students were employed. This can cause tensions when considered within the context of full-time study, which is generally agreed to be a commitment of 40 hours per week, of which an average of 12 hours are direct contact hours (Watson, Johnson & Billet, 2002), leaving students with 28 hours of independent additional study. Beginning students often do not understand this additional workload requirement, or have unrealistic expectations of the amount of time and work involved in university study (Watson et al, 2002; McInnis et al, 2000), which can lead to an over-commitment in part-time work. McInnis et al (2000) report that 42% of students surveyed worked between 11 and 20 hours per week. This can be difficult for students to manage, and it appears that increasingly it is students’ engagement in their study that suffers. This is certainly the case with regard to students studying teacher education, as reported on later in this paper. The most effective method of assisting students find a balance between study and work may be to increase awareness of what university study actually entails – in terms of both in-class and independent study commitments. This strategy was incorporated in the Faculty of Education Orientation program, discussed in detail in the following sections of this paper.

As well as leaving insufficient time for independent study, work commitments may impact upon students’ engagement at university in broader ways. One such aspect, which is directly affected by students’ work commitments, is their ability to participate in, and engage with, the broader social aspects of university culture. One of the most significant predictors of students’ success in making the transition to university is their social involvement (Huon & Sankey, 2002). It is cause for significant concern, therefore, that when many students find themselves in the situation of juggling work and study, their engagement in other aspects of university decreases, including changing attendance patterns, with students becoming more likely to be on campus only when they are in class. In response to their 1999 survey McInnis et al (2000) note with concern that a quarter of all respondents indicated that they had not made close friends at university, and generally kept to themselves. As well as work commitments, students must overcome other barriers to participation in the broader context of university life, including long distance travel, and family commitments.

In order to assist students in making connections with each other and the broader university culture, successful programs must focus on their academic and social well-being (Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001). This may mean building in opportunities for social interaction and
networking within the curriculum, rather than relying on student unions and support services to provide such opportunities in ways and at times suitable for a significant proportion of the student cohort. In the program reported in this paper, such opportunities were provided in several ways, including through involvement of student mentors, and through orientation sessions which required students to interact for both social and academic purposes.

Another significant challenge in engaging students is addressing diverse levels of academic preparation. Of particular relevance in terms of engaging students, is that many students do not see themselves as prepared for the academic tasks required of them (Clerehan & Walker, 2004). Students may be dealing with difficulties in academic preparation ranging from lack of advice and assistance with assignment writing (Peel, 1998), through to more fundamental issues such as difficulties with the levels of literacy, numeracy, or Information/Communication Technology (ICT) proficiency required of them at tertiary level. These requirements become of particular importance in a professional discipline such as teaching, where students are expected to not only have high levels of personal literacy/numeracy/ICT competence, but must also be able to model and teach these skills when on practical placements. As such, achieving adequate levels of proficiency in the above areas is essential for students in teacher education, in order to facilitate their engagement in university, and in their professional context.

In order to engage students therefore, it is important to provide them with opportunities to discover what their own levels of preparation and proficiency actually are, and how these levels compare to university staff’s expectations of them. It is equally important to provide support for those who do not achieve satisfactory levels on commencement of study. Such supplemental instruction, particularly in terms of literacy, is most effective when it takes place within the context of the students’ discipline (Macdonald, 1995; McInnis & James, 1995; Skillen, Trivett, Merten & Percy, 1999). In the program reported in this paper, students were mailed information regarding expected levels of skill in the aforementioned areas, including ‘self-tests’ for literacy, numeracy and ICT. During orientation week, early diagnostic assessment was incorporated, which has direct connection to ongoing, Faculty-based programs of support for students in literacy, numeracy, and ICT. As well as this Faculty-based support, students were also given information regarding university-level support programs, such as the undergraduate unit Thinking and Writing at University, taught by the Centre for the Advancement of Learning & Teaching (CALT), which can be taken as a ‘Liberal Study’ in first and/or second year Education. Such an approach, dealing with discipline-specific as well as generic skills in a variety of learning contexts, assists students in the development of their own personal literacy/numeracy/ICT skills, enhances their ability to teach in these areas, and increases their academic and personal engagement with the university context.

The final challenge to students’ engagement at university relevant to the project reported in this paper is that of student identity. Students who see themselves as being well-integrated into university life, and who have a strong sense of belonging, are said to have made an effective entry to university (Williams, 1982, cited in McInnis & James, 1995). Those students who do not relate to the role of student, or are unsure whether university life suits them, often feel more distanced or isolated in relation to their study and participation at university (McInnis & James, 1995). If students do not commit to the role of university student, it is extremely difficult to succeed in attempts to engage them academically, or in the broader context of university life. The situation is further complicated for those students in teacher education, as they must identify not only with the role of university student, but also
the role of student teacher, and eventually, practising teacher (Britzman, 1992). What students are actually required to do or know varies within these diverse roles – students are very quickly expected to become ‘experts’ in the role of university student, and to feel a strong sense of belonging to the institution, and yet when on practical placements, students are understood to be ‘novices’ in the teaching role, who may not yet ‘belong’ in this environment. This differentiation between novice and expert positions may lead students to disorientation, or even disengagement, from one or more of these roles.

Further, students are less likely to complete their program of study if they do not have a goal commensurate with the aims of the program (Watson et al, 2002). This means that students must invest themselves not only in the role of (at least) student in their particular discipline, but must also invest themselves in the anticipated program outcomes – for example, in professional disciplines, to become a teacher, nurse, or lawyer. It may be difficult, however, for students to know or understand what these program outcomes actually are or what they entail, prior to enrolment. In Hillman’s (2005) report of a national survey of students in their first year of higher education, the most popular reason given by students for withdrawing from study was that the course was “not what they had wanted” (p. 34). This situation may be compounded if studying at university is viewed solely as the means to an end, rather than valued as a learning experience in its own right. Of the four major reasons that influenced students’ decision to enrol in university identified by McInnis and James (1995), two appear to support the view that some students attend university with a focus on fulfilling career aspirations – improving job prospects (84%) and training for a specific job (74%). There is a risk, therefore, that students will view university as the passport to a desired profession, rather than a learning experience, which may impact on their engagement, both academically and in the broader context of university.

To maximise student engagement in their chosen course of study, therefore, students must understand the diverse roles they will be expected to take on and identify with, as well as the overall goals of their chosen course of study. If this does not become clear until after students have commenced this course, we risk further disengagement and potential student withdrawal, resulting from a mismatch between the goals of the individual student, and those of the university. In terms of addressing this challenge to student engagement, the program reported in this paper incorporated structured opportunities for students to engage in the process of questioning and exploring the variety of roles they will take on (university student, student teacher, and eventually practising teacher), and their goals relative to these roles.

The following section describes the student cohort at UTAS who undertook this orientation program, which attempted to address the four challenges to engagement described above.

**Context: The first year Bachelor of Education student cohort at UTAS**

The Tasmanian higher education context is noteworthy in that there is only one University in the state, with three main campuses (Launceston, Hobart, and the Cradle Coast). UTAS offers a wide range of undergraduate degrees, although not all of these are offered across all campuses. The Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) program is a four year degree delivered at the Launceston campus of the University, with the first two years of the program also available at the Cradle Coast campus in Burnie (150 km north west of Launceston). Students completing the first two years in Burnie must then attend the final two years of the program at the Launceston campus.
In order to gain an understanding of the first year cohort, a survey was distributed to first year B.Ed students in Week Two, 2006. Of the 178 first year B.Ed students studying at the Launceston campus, 165 completed surveys were returned, representing a response rate of almost 93%.

Of the students enrolled in the program living in the north-west or west of the state (and so able to complete the first two years at the Cradle Coast campus) 16% chose to attend the Launceston campus. Students from the south and east of the state have no choice but to travel to Launceston to study, and make up 20% of the cohort. Almost 14% come from interstate, and five percent of the cohort is international students. Thus, the majority of students enrolled in the B.Ed program live away from home, or travel daily to attend University.

Female students make up 83% of the total first year student cohort and 59% of the cohort are females under the age of 20. Males continue to be under-represented in teacher education (Grant, 2004): only four males over the age of 25 are enrolled this year. The spread of ages represented in the cohort demonstrates the diversity of experiences with which students come to university, impacting on their learning needs and their preparedness for university life.

Students engage in paid employment at almost the same level as the national figures suggest (McInnis et al, 2000), although almost 33% of students are not currently working. Of those in paid employment 47.2% work on a casual basis, 16.8% work part-time, and 3% are in full-time employment. Significantly, forty per cent of students not currently working indicated that they had no intention of seeking employment. As well as working in paid employment the majority of students indicated that they were engaged in other, community-based activities. These activities include weekly sporting commitments or coaching (37% of the cohort), active church involvement such as scripture classes and youth groups (8%), and arts-related activities such as youth orchestras and drama clubs (8%). This time commitment is often in addition to part-time or casual work. In addition, 22 students (13%) have children of their own.

As discussed in the previous section, this level of commitment to activities beyond university has significant implications for the way students engage academically with university, most noticeably in first year when they are learning to balance work, study, and other commitments. The high level of commitment to non-university activities may also be expected to impact upon students’ social engagement with university life. In teacher training there are further implications, as students must undertake a ten-day practicum in their first year (with combined first/second year students taking on an additional 15 days), and must also come to terms with the multiple roles expected of them.

In terms of students’ perceived preparedness for university, findings from the survey of B.Ed students mirrored those of Clerehan and Walker (2004), in that the majority of students (75%) felt they were either ‘not at all’ or ‘moderately’ prepared for university prior to Orientation week. Almost 40% of students had undertaken at least one of the University’s generic preparation programs (most commonly the five-day UniStart program offered as a summer school). As such, students were commencing study with diverse levels of academic preparation, and with a range of levels of proficiency in literacy, numeracy, and ICT.

Given students’ perceived preparedness for university, their level of commitment to paid and unpaid activities outside of study, and the time spent in travelling to and from campus, these students might be expected to face all four of the challenges described above. Many of them
may find that they have insufficient understanding of the commitment of time required for university study, resulting in a lack of available time for academic and social activities. Many may struggle with the levels of academic proficiency required of them, both at university and in the classroom whilst on practical placements. Finally, many may find it challenging to take on the roles of student and teacher, or may not feel as though they ‘belong’ academically or socially – particularly if they are approaching university purely as a ‘passport’ to a teaching career. These issues were the impetus for the development of a number of strategies implemented in semester 1 this year, to engage students in the most important aspects of university life. These strategies are discussed in the next section.

Addressing the challenges in practice: The Orientation and remediation program

While there are generic Orientation activities offered at UTAS by Student Services and the Student Association, Orientation programs at faculty/degree level are not mandated and, where offered, generally provide at most a one-day introduction to a particular program. Traditionally the B.Ed Orientation was no different. It took place on the Thursday before semester, providing students with information on university-wide support services, the opportunity to meet mentors, and sign-up for first year tutorials. Orientation concluded with a barbecue lunch, where students were able to discuss timetabling and other issues with mentors or the B.Ed First Year Coordinator.

A survey was conducted in the final week of Semester 2, 2005 of all first year Bachelor of Education students, studying full time at both the Launceston and Cradle Coast campuses. The week long Orientation program reported in this paper was designed in response to the findings of this survey and implemented in the week prior to the start of Semester One, 2006.

One of the issues emerging from the 2005 survey was the nature of students’ first ‘reality check’. For the majority of students it was either in their role as university student (preparing their first assignment and/or receiving feedback on that work) or their role as student teacher (during their first practical placement). Other issues identified in the survey were those to do with engagement in the broader context of the university, and coming to terms with the academic expectations and requirements of university study. Emerging from the literature, although not specifically addressed in the 2005 survey, was the amount of hours student spend in paid employment. Thus the 2006 B.Ed Orientation program was structured around four key aims, orienting students to: the academic environment; the broader university context; the nature of university study (including balancing paid work and study); and the notion of identity – taking on multiple roles as university student and student teacher.

As an initial step in making explicit the academic requirements and expectations of the B.Ed program, an Orientation kit was prepared and sent to students from mid-January, 2006. This kit provided general information on the B.Ed program, as well as information about being a university student, being a teacher, and self-appraisal ‘quizzes’ in the areas of literacy, numeracy and ICT. The kit also included detailed information regarding the Orientation week program, and the first and second year timetable. While attendance at Orientation Week was not compulsory, the expectation was clearly conveyed that University began with Orientation, rather than at the beginning of the academic year.

In order to introduce students to the broader university context, and given that the majority of first year B.Ed students do not live in Launceston and are unfamiliar with the campus, an extensive campus tour was conducted in small groups early on Day One. Mentors
accompanied each group, as did a staff member, and students were introduced to the library, as well as the location and purpose of key sites around the campus (teaching spaces, staff offices, Student Services and Student Administration, the university bookshop and printery, car parking, student accommodation, security, and sporting facilities). As part of the campus tour students were introduced to key academic and administrative staff who work with first year Education students. Opportunities for social interaction were provided during morning tea, which was part of the tour. As well as a physical tour of the campus, familiarising students with the ICT environment of the university was also important. Again, mentors were in attendance at a series of Essential ICT sessions, providing support to students in setting up their email and Vista accounts.

The orientation to the broader university context continued on Day Two with ‘The Great Race’. The Race provided an opportunity for students to connect socially with peers, mentors, and teaching staff, while undertaking team challenges that saw them revisit some of the key sites from the previous day’s campus tour, and working together in problem-solving challenges. Students’ comments suggest that the Great Race was a significant moment in Orientation Week, allowing them to establish relationships with each other and with members of staff that might otherwise have taken much longer to develop. Other opportunities for social interaction with peers, mentors, and staff were provided at barbecue lunches on Monday and Friday.

In order to orient students to the academic environment of the university sessions on lectures and note-making, the research process, essay writing, and oral presentations were conducted. Students are able to access online versions of the lecture notes relating to each of these key areas, linking Orientation week to ongoing support. Expectations of staff were made clear throughout these sessions, especially in regard to attendance, workload, and assessment requirements. Optional sessions were run by Student Services on time management, stress management, juggling money, work and study, as well as sessions for mature age students. Other sessions, run by faculty staff, dealt with combining first and second year of the B.Ed program (23.5% of students combine their first two years), preparing for week one and beyond, and on how the B.Ed course develops across the four years. These sessions, conducted in small groups, allowed for ongoing dialogue regarding expectations and study requirements. Question and answer sessions were built into the program, allowing students the opportunity to ask questions of relevance to the general student body. Time for one-on-one consultation with staff was also provided throughout the week.

Addressing the issue of identity (taking on multiple roles as student and student teacher) was also a key aim of the program. A fourth year student was invited to speak to the first years regarding life as a university student, and more specifically life as an Education student. As Education students are moving into the world of teaching, not just of university, it was also important that they begin the process of being oriented into the profession. With this in mind, three current teachers addressed the students on the world of teaching and how university prepares students (or not) for classroom practice. One teacher was beginning his second year of teaching, one teacher had 15 years’ experience, and the third teacher (who the students regarded as highly inspirational) had 40 years’ experience. These teachers talked about issues such as school experience, seeing the world of university in the broader context (not just as a site for learning about teaching), and outlined some of the realities of life in the classroom.

The fourth aim of the program was to address students’ learning needs, specifically those relating to literacy, numeracy and ICT. This issue was highlighted in a submission from the
Teachers Registration Board, Tasmania (2005) to the Federal Parliamentary Inquiry into Teacher Education. This submission states that as part of the selection process for teacher education, students should have ‘attained specified standards of literacy and numeracy in order to become a teacher’ (p. 2). The importance of strong literacy, numeracy, and ICT skills cannot be overstated when seen in this light. In an effort to assess students’ literacy, numeracy and ICT capabilities, and thus provide adequate support for students with low levels of skill, diagnostic assessments were conducted as part of Orientation Week.

The ACER Tertiary Writing Assessment was used to assess literacy; numeracy was assessed through a test developed within the faculty, based on results of assessments of second, third and fourth year students; and ICT was assessed through a skills audit. Support tutorials are offered to those students who do not have requisite skills or capabilities in each of the three key areas. The results of the ACER Tertiary Writing Assessment will not be known until Week Three, and support tutorials will commence in Week Five. ICT support tutorials commenced in Week One and numeracy tutorials commenced in Week Two. One third of students tested required numeracy support, and a quarter required ICT support. It must be noted however, that due to staff workload commitments only three tutorials per week (catering for a total of 60 students) in each of the identified areas are able to be offered, meaning that the cut-off point for inclusion in the support tutorials is relatively low. The Faculty is currently looking at strategies to assist students with intermediate skills, and exploring the idea of pre-requisites for course entry.

In recognition of the fact that instruction in literacy skills and how they apply to specific disciplines is of benefit for all students, ongoing support is also provided through a series of compulsory “Study Skills” lectures, covering academic integrity, referencing, accessing library resources, essay planning and essay writing. With regard to literacy, for example, ongoing instruction and resources in this area are developed (in conjunction with CALT) within specific unit curricula. Assessment tasks in foundation professional studies units are structured in such a way that ongoing literacy development is assessed, allowing for a pathway to be offered to students into units that will encourage and support their progress in this area. One such pathway is the unit Thinking and Writing at University.

The following table provides an overview of the program, showing how the different aspects were sequenced.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support Tutorials (6 weeks):</th>
<th>Study Skills Lectures (weeks 1 – 5)</th>
<th>Embedded Support in Education core unit:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commencing Week 1 – ICT</td>
<td>Academic Integrity</td>
<td>Staged assessment tasks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commencing Week 2 – Numeracy</td>
<td>Referencing</td>
<td>Provision of extensive written feedback on first assignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commencing Week 7 – Literacy</td>
<td>Evaluating information / evidence</td>
<td>Publication of assessment rubric</td>
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Contextualising student engagement: Orientation and beyond in teacher education  
S.Pittaway & T.Moss - Refereed Paper
Initial indicators are that the program as a whole has been highly successful. In a survey conducted in Week Two of semester, 77.5% of students felt ‘prepared’, ‘well prepared’, or ‘extremely prepared’ for university after attending orientation, compared with 25% before orientation. Whilst the long-term effects of this program on student engagement, education, and retention are yet to be established, such a positive improvement on students’ perceptions of preparedness is itself an important outcome. Just as importantly, students reported feeling a greatly enhanced sense of connectedness, to the university, the faculty, their career, and each other after attending orientation. These results, although not directly related to students’ academic achievements, are just as important in ensuring ongoing engagement.

Conclusion

The orientation and support strategies described in this paper represent a considerable commitment, financially and in terms of staff time and energy, by the Faculty of Education at UTAS in addressing issues of student engagement from the earliest stages of students’ participation in the university community. As is evidenced by the inclusion of the program of diagnostic assessment and ongoing support classes within the Faculty, this commitment is to more than just one week prior to the start of semester. Rather, this program represents an attempt to provide an integrated, contextualised approach that will support students not only in the transition to university study, but also in the transition to their future careers. This program recognises that if we are to take seriously an attempt to engage students in higher education, we must provide programs that are student-centred, systematic, well-timed, and have as a goal, the education, rather than just retention, of students (Tinto, 1987).

The research reported here is still in progress, as is the orientation and support program itself. Recommendations from the research are yet to be determined, and will depend to a large extent on the enduring impact of the program. However, even at this stage, one finding is clear – we must engage with the issue of engagement in higher education in research and in practice, if we are to continue to meet the diverse academic, social, and personal needs of our students. We cannot afford to simply hope that students will make the transition to university, managing the competing demands of work and study, understanding the importance of the broader university context, reaching standards of proficiency in literacy, numeracy and ICT, and feeling as though they belong in a range of situations. Programs such as that described in this paper show that teaching staff not only should help in this process – we also can help.

References


