

Why do “at risk” students choose to attend or avoid specific support programs: A case study of student experience at the University of Canberra

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In 2008 the Australian Government released a seminal review which set the future direction of Higher Education in Australia (Bradley 2008). This paper looks pragmatically at the consequences of increasing enrolments and recruiting a cohort of students who are likely to be challenged by university study. While it may seem obvious that offering additional support programs are warranted it is not necessarily the case that students will attend them (Kennelly, Maldoni, & Davies, 2010). This paper attempts to address some of the issues raised by Ransom (2007) and others concerning non-attendance at support programs. The study is exploratory, based on a small sample, and it looks through the prism of assessment results and interview data at two cohorts of ‘at risk’ students, one cohort regularly attending a specific support program and one cohort irregularly attending. It uses existing ‘English as an Additional Language students’ as a basis for analysis because they represent a cohort that shares many characteristics with **other** university recruits who find university life challenging. This paper seeks to document the language and academic backgrounds of students and speculates on future strategies to attract greater student participation and suggests the potential direction for further research.

Key words: “at risk” students, English language proficiency, academic literacy, lowering academic standards, Bradley Report.

1. Introduction

Within the Faculty of Business and Government at the University of Canberra an across discipline, team-taught Unit Support Program (USP) in conjunction with the first year unit Introduction to Management (ITM) has been running successfully for English as an additional language (EAL) students and other interested students enrolled in the unit. Many commentators (Bretag, 2001; Durkin & Main 2002; Wingate, 2006; Dowling et al., 2007; Baik & Greig, 2009) champion the importance of a discipline based academic skills program to enhance the learning outcomes for EAL students and others. Unlike many support programs at the University of Canberra, the USP is an embedded weekly program in the unit, Introduction to Management. The USP provides academic skills development required for successful study mainly in the discipline of Management. It is distinct from other support programs that provide more

generalised study skills support. The program participants, defined for the purposes of the program and for this paper as “at risk” students, are those whose applied English competence is such that they are considered in danger of failing this unit (Kennelly, Maldoni, & Davies, 2010). This paper explores the issues related to low English language proficiency (ELP) in the context of the literature which suggests the success of these programs is related to greater participation and the possible importance of mandatory attendance (Bretag, 2004, p. 537, Baik & Greig, 2009, p. 408).

There is little research into the reasons for “at risk” students not attending support programs. Ransom (2007, p. A22) suggests that non-compliance with language support needs was “clearly” an issue to be explored and further understanding of the reasons for this was needed to inform strategies for increasing participation in support programs. Reberger (2007, p. 8) agreed, noting that a greater focus on engagement of students in this (at risk) category was warranted. Recent studies (Von Randow, 2010; Ransom 2009, Reberger, 2007) suggest that there are a number of “at risk” students failing to utilise the support services available. At a number of Australasian Universities¹, diagnostic testing has been introduced into first year units to assess students’ ELP to ensure better targeting of support services. In particular Von Randow (2010a) found that a significant number of “at risk” students avoided diagnostic testing in the erroneous view that they would be “found out” and asked to leave the university. When students were diagnosed as in need of help from a support program they refused to come on the basis that it was not mandated, offering reasons such as “I got entry meant that I had the English required”, or “it will appear on my transcript” (Ransom, 2009, p. A22), or “I don’t have time” (Von Randow, 2010a).

Both Von Randow (2010) and Ransom (2009) found that a more widely accepted or compulsory program attracted wider participation. However, Knowles (1973, 1990) suggested an alternative view in his foundation work on adult learners insisting that success of such programs depended on students making their own choices as opposed to being told to attend a support program. Knowles did not, however, address the question of whether “at risk” students were in a position to make an informed choice given their limited exposure to an academic environment, combined with a low ELP.

The Bradley Review (2008) into the Australian university sector increases the relevance of this discussion. This Review was commissioned by the Australian Federal Government and was aimed at addressing the need for a skilled workforce to meet the needs of Australia in the 21st Century. This has included setting, arguably, ambitious targets for increasing the proportion of 25-34 year olds with a university Bachelor’s degree from 29% to 40% by 2020 (Bradley 2008, p. vii). The review further noted, that some European countries had already achieved 50% of this age group. The government has accepted most of the Bradley recommendations, notably those relating to a significant expansion of student numbers. These additional students are being sourced from areas that have been less well represented in university education, including those from remote areas and from areas associated with low socio-economic status.

The target of 40% by 2020 creates challenges for university teachers and administrators. Whilst the Bradley Review (2008) has recommended the implementation of programs to encourage non-traditional students from Year 9 upwards to see university as part of their educational plan, many of these students have attended schools that have few, if any, preparatory programs for tertiary study. While not all students will be challenged by university study, for many they will be the first in their families or area to attend university and therefore their knowledge of what university might be like or how to study at the university level is likely to be inadequate. Universities will therefore need to adopt strategies to take account of many underprepared enrollees; these include lowering standards (a generally unpalatable and unpublished option opened to universities), providing additional support to students who need it, and a combination of both (Tarver, 2010; Kennelly, 2011).

¹ Griffith, Sydney, Auckland, Melbourne and Adelaide.

This paper seeks to document the academic background of students who attended a support program and speculates on future strategies that may be useful to attract greater student participation. Guided by the work of Biggs (2003), Hoskins et al. (1998) and Kennelly, Maldoni, and Davies (2010), the paper examines the following student factors: the extent to which students are ready for study, the students' age and students' personal experiences (that is the influence of work, high school and exposure to English). This work has not attempted to test student motivation nor the extent to which a student has a surface or deep orientation to learning in a particular course or program (Biggs, 2003).

In its conclusions the paper establishes the potential direction for further research into the motivation of students, the impact of strategies such as whole cohort diagnostic testing and compulsory attendance at support programs; summarises major reasons for non attendance; and posits a range of strategies to encourage and facilitate attendance at voluntary support programs, especially for those students with poor academic literacy.

1.1. The success of USP

The USP provides academic skills and language development in a non-generic, unit content-specific way with the overall aim of improving learning outcomes for students of a particular unit (e.g. ITM) (Kennelly, Maldoni, & Davies, 2010). The USP has been running with participants experiencing increased assessment rates in 11 consecutive semesters at UC and attendance has increased from an initial average of five students per week in 2006 to 30 in 2010. This has been anecdotally linked to word-of-mouth promotion amongst students of the benefits of attendance. Nevertheless, a significant number of students who would benefit from attendance still do not attend. At the end of 2008, the University commissioned this study to determine specifically why some students avoid attending USP and to examine ways to encourage those students to become regular attendees (Kennelly, Maldoni & Davies, 2010).

2. Methodology, Findings and Case studies

This research is based on an examination of four student assessment pieces (weekly multiple choice questionnaires, an essay, a presentation, and an exam), over 200 student evaluation surveys, and individual interviews of a sample of 22 students (11 who attended the USP regularly and 11 who did not). Six case studies are presented; three from each cohort to illustrate the findings² of “subversion of entry requirements”, “perseverance”, “extra-curricular diversions”, “readiness”, “academic English skills” and “capacity to self-identify as needing help”.

The findings are divided into three parts, the first dealing with that cohort of students who rarely attended USP, the second with those who were regular attendees, and finally the paper will compare the two cohorts.

2.1. Findings from the irregularly attending cohort

The first part of the findings presented here deals with those students who did not regularly attend the USP. Examination of data from six semesters indicated that 52.3%, that is 148 identified “at risk” students, did not regularly attend the offered USP support program, despite considerable encouragement from tutors and conveners of the USP (Kennelly, Maldoni, & Davies, 2010, p. 67).

Of the irregularly participating students in the USP, 38 were chosen as the sample for the study. To minimise differences between this cohort and the attending cohort, only those who had submitted all pieces of ITM assessment but still performed poorly overall were selected (Kennelly, Maldoni, & Davies, 2010). That is, those that did not complete all assessment items

² These findings came from a thematic analysis of interview data used in writing the case studies.

were excluded from the study. Note that more than 90% of the students in the irregularly participating group failed the unit. The students' academic history was studied and established that their "at risk" status was not confined to ITM, but extended across other areas of their degree studies. Six of these 38 students had failed to re-enrol, so were excluded. Of the remaining 32, 21 students were selected for interview. Their ITM assessment and USP attendance was examined in detail prior to the interviews and was used as background to explore their understanding of USP and their views on attendance and non-attendance (see p. 12 of this paper).

Table 1 shows the 21 students who were sampled from this cohort. Of these, 11 participated in either a small focus group or an interview.

Table 1. Summary of academic history as at December 2009 of students from the irregularly attending cohort. The first 11 listed in the first column were interviewed. The number in brackets indicates the number of times the students attended a USP workshop and the highlighted **CS** means that a brief case study appears in the text. Pseudonyms have been used throughout. Columns 2 and 3 present the students' age and country of birth, columns 4, 5 and 6 indicate the semester in which they studied, the unit studied and their final grade respectively. Columns 7 and 8 indicate their progression during their studies: the first figure is the number of units in which they enrolled and the second figure the number of units failed.

Irregularly attending Students/Att. USP/case study	Current performance			Progression			
	Age	Country	Sem.	Unit	Grade	Units enrolled	Failed
1. (3)	19	Pakistan	1/09	ITM	P	4	1
2. (0)	18	Vietnam	1/09	ITM	F	8	7
3. (0)	20	Pakistan	1/09	ITM	F	13	5
4. (6) CS	23	China	2/08	ITM	F	11	3
5. (4)	21	Vietnam	2/08	ITM	F	22	15
6. (0) CS	21	China	2/07	ITM	P	21	9
7. (1)	21	Pakistan	2/07	ITM	F	12	7
8. (1) CS	22	China	2/07	ITM	F	27	20
9. (1)	22	China	1/07	ITM	F	21	12
10. (3)	24	Australia	2/07	OB*	F	14	6
11. (7)	24	China	2/07	OB*	P	16	0
12. (0)	22	Japan discontinued	2/06	ITM	F	17	7
13. (1)	23	Indonesia discontinued	2/06	ITM	F	28	21
14. (0)	22	Vietnam	2/08	ITM	F	16	6
15. (2)	20	China	2/08	ITM	P	14	4
16. (1)	23	China Discontinued	2/08	ITM	F	18	13
17. (5)	21	China discontinued	2/08	ITM	F	8	7
18. (0)	18	China	1/09	ITM	F	4	1
19. (0)	18	India	1/09	ITM	F	4	2
20. (0)	24	China	1/09	ITM	F	4	3
21. (0)	24	China	1/09	ITM	F	14	8
	Av. 21.5 yrs					296	157 53%

* Note: Two USP Organisational Behaviour (OB) students were included as the program extended to OB for one semester. These interviews were used as an indicator of whether the problems of attendance were limited to ITM and to provide some validation that the findings are consistent across more than one unit.

The average age of this cohort was 21.5 years. Seventeen out of 21 students failed the unit. The average fail rate in academic progression was 53%, that is, on average, members of this cohort failed more than half the units in which they were enrolled.

2.2. Case studies from the irregularly attending cohort

The key findings outlined in the first three case studies are: “subversion of entry requirements”, “perseverance”, and “extra-curricular diversions”.

Case study 1: Systemic problems – subverting an already low entrance requirement

Lee completed years 11 and 12 at Copeland College, obtained an Australian Tertiary Academic Rank (ATAR) of 75, including English for second language students (ESL), which requires no formal essay writing. As an ATAR of 75 and completion of English satisfied direct entry requirements to university, she started a commerce degree in 2007 and failed nine units out of nine attempted in her first year. In 2008 she enrolled at UCC and at the end of 2009, Lee had enrolled in 27 units in total and had passed seven. She had not completed her first year of study. Lee stated that she felt frustrated by her lack of ELP and the fact that she had been “pushed” into units she could not pass, but after three years she was starting to pass her units.

There is a problem highlighted here for all stakeholders relating to the university entry level of English language proficiency. Lee’s experiences are representative of seven out of 11 interviewees who came from the Canberra College system (senior High School, years 11 and 12) with an Australian Tertiary Academic Rank (ATAR) between 63 and 88 and all did English for ESL, which is conversational, rather than tertiary English. English Language proficiency for entry at university level is assessed by the *International English Language Testing System* (IELTS, 2005). However, by using ATAR to gain entry to the University of Canberra College (UCC provides an alternate pathway for university entry for students who do not have the qualifications or the language skills for direct entry (set at IELTS 6 for the university of Canberra)) students can avoid having their English proficiency tested through IELTS. This phenomenon was first observed in 2001 and reported in research work by Maldoni, Kennelly, and Davies (2009). Later research at the universities of Adelaide (Reberger, 2007), Melbourne (Ransom, 2009) and Auckland (Von Randow, 2010) demonstrated that this phenomenon is not confined to Canberra, or even Australia. In particular Ransom (2009, p. A16) found that many international students entering University via the VCE (Victorian equivalent of the Canberra College system) had ELP below the threshold required for successful study at Melbourne University. This weakness in ELP standards of entry continues to be exploited resulting in the University recruiting students with year 10 English. The Director of UCC (the University of Canberra EAL College), recently confirmed that “... our ACT college internationals perform very poorly and usually do not clear UCC to get entry to UC” (London, 2010).

Case study 2: Recognising the need for help – perseverance and seeking help

Julie shares: “My need was to write better, the ASP [academic study skills, a generic support program at UC] and the one to one consultation (in the unit Government Business Relations) were more valuable for me. My problem was I could not produce a good essay. I understood the theory, but my writing let me down. So at the end of semester 2/2008 I did the ASP ‘How to write an essay’ course every day for a month. Then in 1/2009 I studied really hard and with the heavy assessment in ITM I just concentrated on my writing. I had lots of help from my Government Business Relations [GBR] tutor and the unit had a three hour consultation period where you could get answers on a one to one basis”

Commensurate with the findings of Tindle and Lincoln (2000), this case demonstrates the importance of perseverance (determination in the face of obstacles) and confirms the authors’ intuitive expectation that individuals have differing requirements and assistance is not

necessarily provided from a single source, and in some cases may best be provided from outside the USP.

Case study 3: Extra-curricular diversions – help and hindrance.

Adam came to Canberra with his parents from China in time to do the last semester of year 10 at Kambah High School. He noticed on the first day that there appeared to be no other Chinese students; in fact he could not see any Asian students. An Anglo-Australian came up to him at lunch time and said “Owyagoin” and he said “I beg your pardon”. The student immediately had a friend who helped him understand Australian vernacular. His dream in life was to be a pilot and he enrolled at Lake Tuggeranong College because they had a pilot flying program. Of course all the flying instruction was in English. At the end of College he got an ATAR of 68 and was cajoled into going to University by his father. In his first semester (1/2007) he was more focused on flying and so attributed his passing of only one unit (accounting) to this. He failed ITM (47%) after attending USP three times. He was better prepared 2/2007, had his pilot’s license and so reduced his flying hours. He did much better in semester 2/2007, passing three units including ITM. With the help of an Australian born friend and constant exposure to English speakers at the flying school, at university and work (a local club) his ability and confidence with English speaking and writing improved.

This story illustrates both the downside of an external activity, and in the long run considerable benefits. For example, six out of 11 interviewees noted they were distracted by extra curricula activity while attending university. They worked more than 10 hours per week and all thought that this negatively affected their studies. Such activities can assist with readiness, for example through greater exposure to conversational English, or hinder readiness by taking time from study.

In summary, the typical student in this cohort was 21, more likely to be male, with ELP below the standard required for successful university study. The student was distracted because of the need to earn money and so worked more than 10 hours per week; the student had no clear understanding of what the university requires of students. During study, the student persevered despite a high failure rate and their ELP gradually improved over time. The student was likely to attend less than two sessions of the USP in a semester.

2.3. Findings from the regularly attending cohort

The second part of the findings presented here focuses on those students who regularly attended the USP. Examination of attendance and assessment data from six semesters of the USP indicated that 47.7% of at-risk students did regularly attend USP (Kennelly, Maldoni, & Davies, 2010, p. 67).

Sampling of these 121 students resulted in 41 being selected for further examination on the basis that they had attended more than half the 12 USP workshops in a given semester and that they were still actively engaged in study at the university. Their academic history was then studied and established that their “at risk” status was not confined to ITM, but extended across all areas of their study. At the end of this process, 21 students were selected for interview to establish why they attended USP and what the benefits were. Their ITM assessment and USP attendance were examined in detail prior to the interviews where questioning explored their understanding of USP and their views on attendance and non attendance.

Table 2 shows the 21 students who were sampled from this cohort. Eleven participated in either a small focus group or an individual interview.

Table 2. Summary of academic history as at December 2009 of students from the regularly attending cohort. The first column numbers all the students in this cohort, the first 11 were interviewed. The number in brackets indicates the number of times the students attended a USP workshop and the highlighted **CS** means that a brief case study appears in the text where pseudonyms have been used. Columns 2 and 3 present the students' age and country of birth, columns 4, 5 and 6 indicate the semester in which they studied, the unit studied and their final grade respectively. Columns 7 and 8 indicate their progression during their studies: the first figure is the number of units they had enrolled in and the second figure the number of units failed.

Regularly attending Students/Att. USP/case study	Current performance					Progression	
	Age	Country	Sem.	Unit	Grade	Units enrolled	Failed
1. (9) CS	23	Australia	1/09	ITM	P	8	0
2. (8) CS	40	Namibia	1/09	ITM	P	14	3
3. (11)	25	China	1/09	ITM	P	4	2
4. (7)	23	China	1/09	ITM	P	4	1
5. (6) CS	21	Saudi	2/08	ITM	P	26	9
6. (6)	20	Vietnam	2/08	ITM	P	12	4
7. (11)	30	Sudan	1/07	ITM	P	19	4
8. (8)	30	Vietnam (Graduated 2/08)	2/06	ITM	Cr	24	1
9. (6)	35	Sudan	1/08	ITM	P	19	5
10.(9)	37	Sudan	1/08	ITM	P	25	8
11.(7)	22	China	2/07	ITM	P	25	9
12.(9)	22	Myanmar	1/09	ITM	P	13	5
13.(9)	19	Thailand	1/09	ITM	P	20	7
14.(8)	20	India	2/08	ITM	P	13	4
15.(10)	21	Vietnam Grad 2/2009	2/08	ITM	P	20	0
16.(8)	28	China	2/08	ITM	P	4	0
17.(8)	20	Pakistan	2/08	ITM	P	11	0
18.(9)	25	Burma	2/07	ITM	Cr	9	2
19.(10)	24	Burma	2/07	ITM	Cr	6	0
20.(12)	36	Sudan (Not enr. 2/2009)	1/07	ITM	P	14	7
21.(6)	21	Australia	1/07	ITM	P	21	0
	Av. 26 yrs					311	71 22.8%

2.4. Case studies from the regularly attending cohort

The interview group of 21 students had an average attendance of 8.5 from a maximum of 12 workshops; all had passed the unit. The cohort had an average failure rate of 22.8%, that is on average, this cohort failed 22.8% of units enrolled. Nine of 11 students had exposure to English beyond high school, only two out of 11 had come through the Canberra College system and the average age of this cohort was 26 years.

A feature that emerged at interviews was that some members of this group were less concerned about making mistakes, of losing face, expressing a more open attitude, “I don’t care if I am embarrassed”. In this cohort work was rarely used as a reason for poor results.

The key findings outlined in the next three case studies are: “readiness”, “academic English skills”, and “capacity to self-identify as needing help”.

Case Study 4: Age as a variable - maturity and readiness

Brian left school having not finished year 10, served an apprenticeship and became a qualified carpenter and then went to the Canberra Institute of Technology to complete a certificate IV in building and construction. At age 23 he enrolled at UC through mature age entry. He worked 40 hours per week during both semesters of 2009. He struggled in most units, getting 15/30 for his major essay in ITM. He found written assignments difficult. He attributed his pass in ITM to his attendance at USP nine times. He went on to pass all units in his first two semesters.

This case demonstrates the importance of maturity, or what some call readiness or preparedness, that is the influence of employment, competency in ELP, and personal motivation with a willingness to accept assistance where required. It also raises the question: Is age a simple predictor of success and/or readiness? As Hoskins, Newstead, and Dennis (1997) found in their UK study, mature age students gained better degrees on average than younger students.

Case study 5: The language barrier – English versus “academic” English

Mary completed primary school in the USA, grew up in a bi-lingual home; Arabic and English. She completed a preparation English program with an IELTS score of 6.5, but still had problems in first year at university passing only three of eight units attempted. In second year she passed six of 10 including Academic English. In third year she passed eight of eight including ITM with regular attendance at the USP. This student had much greater exposure to English than many of those in the non-attending cohort. However, she still needed more help with her English for university before her skills developed to a point where she felt she was able to maintain satisfactory progression.

This case continues the theme of maturity but with greater focus on preparedness, and particularly preparedness not just in the form of basic ELP, but the need for proficiency in academic literacy. It is important to distinguish between conversational English and academic English. Even those skilled in conversational English seem destined to struggle with the type of English used at university. This requires the particular attention of teachers in support programs to challenge the presumption that an IELTS score of itself alone provides the student with sufficient English skills to survive at university.

Case study 6: Self awareness – some students (including potential “Bradley” students) refuse to identify that they are “at risk”

Josephine is a mature age African student. She does not identify as an EAL student as she is a refugee with Australian permanent resident status. Notwithstanding this, she has challenges with academic language and Australian university culture. She has been in Australia for four years, and is a 40 year old single mother who has challenges with childcare. She struggled with ITM, but found USP with the support of her tutor, whom she trusted, and attended eight times. She was a quiet student who whilst gaining only moderate marks in her essay and exam still passed the unit.

One of the difficulties in identifying “at risk” students is the common assumption, especially from tutoring staff, that they will mainly be EAL students on study visas, commonly referred to as international students. When this assumption was examined, it was not always the case. The African students at the university (9% of students in the study) are a case in point. They are permanent residents and all those interviewed proudly (and loudly) declared themselves to be

Australian and not part of the international student community. Nevertheless, their results indicate clearly that they are in need of support. As this case demonstrates, a student's perceptions of the group she identifies with can be influenced by a trusting staff relationship where the student is able to identify their need for assistance and access to academic skills support. This has significant implications for future "Bradley students" who may similarly refuse to self-identify as needing assistance, and therefore present a challenge to staff in providing support.

In summary, the typical student in this cohort was 26, more likely to be male, and had previous exposure to the English language. The student had an appreciation of what academic study entails and self awareness of the need for assistance. The student was willing to work hard, did pass more than 75% of units attempted, was not easily embarrassed and did seek help by attending more than eight USP sessions in a semester to improve the chances of success.

3. Comparison of the two cohorts

This section compares the irregularly attending and regularly attending cohorts. The irregularly attending cohort was made up of identified "at risk" students who did not attend the USP regularly and failed ITM. The regularly attending cohort was also made up of identified and self identified "at risk" students who passed ITM. The data in Tables 1 and 2 includes those students who were subsequently selected for interview. In both cohorts 11 students were interviewed. Table 3 compares the two cohorts.

Table 3. Comparative findings – irregularly attending and regularly attending cohorts.

	Irregularly attending cohort	Regularly attending cohort
Students in sample	38	41
Students selected for interview	22	21
Students interviewed	11	11
Gender balance	55% male	55% male
Expressed fear of failing ITM unit	64%	64%
Used study peer ³ during year	46%	64%
Would recommend USP to others	90%*	100%
Average failure rate during studies	53%	22.8%
Average mark in ITM	>50%	59%
Average age (years)	21.5	26
Attendance at USP / 12 sessions	1.3	8.5
Working more than 10 hours per week	55%	72%
ATAR score	63-88 7 students	Only 2 students. ATAR not recorded. Others from foreign high schools.
Attended ACT college system	64%	22%

* ASP and consultation in the unit Government Business Relations worked better for one student.

³ A study peer is a "buddy or fellow student with whom the student could talk freely. This maybe a formal or informal system"

The most significant difference found between the cohorts is their progression, age and attendance at the Canberra (senior secondary) Colleges.

1. Progression in the attending cohort showed students failed units at less than half the rate (22.8%) of the irregularly attending cohort (53%). That is students in the non attending cohort failed more than twice the number of units in their degree program as those in the attending cohort.
2. The attending cohort had an average age of 26 years as opposed to the irregularly attending cohort of 21.5 years. As reported previously Hoskins, Newstead and Dennis (1997) found in their UK study that age was a factor for success in university study.
3. As previously highlighted using College (ATAR) entry allowed two out of 11 students in the attending cohort and seven out of 11 students in the irregularly attending cohort to avoid satisfying the normal English language requirement for university to their detriment.

4. Discussion

At interview, the regularly attending cohort was generally more comfortable expressing themselves in English than the irregularly attending cohort, although this may be due in part to maturity (Hoskins et al., 1998). Interviews with the regularly attending cohort led the authors to the hypothesis that the USP was more meaningful for those students who had basic ELP already.

Only two out of 11 students in the regularly attending cohort came from the Canberra College system, while seven out of 11 in the irregularly attending cohort came from the Canberra College system. In the regularly attending cohort, most students had considerable exposure to English above and beyond their High School education. As discussed in case study 1, in the irregularly attending cohort the seven students from the Canberra College system were able to achieve a university entrance ATAR without completing Tertiary English. This resulted in the students commencing university study without the awareness, maturity, English language competence or the skills required to be successful in an academic environment. It is as though “they do not know what they do not know”. They have difficulty understanding the potential challenges in front of them and therefore cannot appreciate that USP might help them cope. During interviews several students suggested that a discipline based skills development program (such as the USP) for students who do not have the required academic English skills needs to be compulsory. A comment from the last USP workshop in semester 2/2009 illustrates the dilemma of many “at risk” students not participating regularly in USP:

Normally 15/16 students came to USP with few EAL students among them. 42 students came to final USP half of whom were EAL students. The English language facilitator asked the following question, “Who wants to join a group to talk about what the case study means?” as opposed to joining a group to look at the analysis or what theories relate in this case and where. 18 students wanted to understand what the case study meant. That is, these students perceived a problem with their ELP at the end of semester when there was no more help available (Maldoni, 2009; a USP convenor).

Given the findings of this research study, this anecdote further suggests that students without basic ELP would find the content of USP difficult and challenging and in the main would not attend.

4.1. Student views on attendance barriers and initiatives

The student perspective on performance is of interest as they are intimately involved in the process and readily identify issues surrounding attendance and their perceptions of the problems associated with attendance at USP. Below are the aggregated reasons given by students for non-attendance and student suggestions to encourage “at risk” students to attend.

Aggregated reasons for non attendance included:

- The attraction of money through employment was a distraction from study;
- Lack of motivation – “it is all too hard”;
- Inability to understand the lecturer, the tutor, fellow class mates – “it is too embarrassing”;
- Possibility of eventually passing without going to USP (some students had been attempting to pass for four semesters);
- Delays in the Visa issuing process mean some “at risk” students do not arrive in Australia until well into the semester (up to four weeks after commencement).

Aggregated suggestions from this cohort on ways to encourage attendance included to:

- Make the program compulsory;
- Use a fluent English speaking Asian student to sell the program in the first lecture;
- Use dynamic small group learning;
- Get students to come in pairs or groups;
- Be specific about target groups and use incentives, because at some point some students found that the USP became non threatening;
- Ensure new unit (e.g. ITM) tutors come to the first USP session (put it in their contract).

4.2. Why do some students avoid attending USP?

Those students who avoided attending the USP regularly provided a variety of reasons. It is not a cohesive cohort; each of the students interviewed had their own story. There were some themes that crossed many stories and these included embarrassment at being put in yet another formal learning environment where they could not understand what was being said. Furthermore, by the time they translated the question, formed an answer in their mother tongue and retranslated, the conversation had moved on. Cullity (2008, p. 48) makes the point that students are “proactive or reluctant help seekers” and the way to get proactivity is to ensure that “at risk” students have a strong, trusting staff relationship with their tutor and/or USP convenor. For others it was a combination of either not understanding that they needed further development in ELP or that their entry to university meant that their English language skills were sufficient (Ransom, 2009; Von Randow, 2010). For a majority of this cohort, work was both needed (to fund their study) and a distraction exacerbating its negative impact when it did not require the use of English.

Do the students see what is being offered (USP) as being useful to them? The readiness develops at different points in time, for some students it is a matter of a few weeks into their first semester, for others it can be years. Some “at risk” students do not appear to have sufficient knowledge or maturity to know that the USP may assist them or they refuse to identify themselves as “at risk”. Each student in each cohort has a different story of learning and coming to readiness for successful university study.

This research shows that “one size does not fit all”. Contrary to initial expectations, the students did not fall into two neat cohorts of irregularly attending students who have failed and regularly attending students who have succeeded. Instead, students fell into the following loose groupings: those who attended and passed; those who attended and failed; those who did not attend and passed and those who repeated the unit until they passed. However, the point of commonality was that all 22 students had individual needs and 21 found the USP valuable in satisfying their specific needs.

Mechanisms other than the USP may be appropriate to cater for individual differences amongst students. For instance, one student found that the more generalised Academic Skills Program (ASP) offered by the University helped more than the specialised USP. This is consistent with expectations that solutions are not universal and even though some programs may satisfy the

majority, they will not suit all. However, it should be noted that six out of 11 students in the attending cohort also participated in the ASP and although they found the services helpful, only one student preferred it to the USP.

An important factor arising from the study was the role of the tutorial staff in the parent program (Introduction to Management). While some tutors actively used the USP to supplement their teaching, for instance, by insisting that students, as a measure of commitment, attend the USP as a condition of re-submitting failed assessment work, others were more passive in their encouragement of students to attend USP sessions. This was addressed through (compulsory) meetings between USP and unit staff at key points throughout the semester - prior to week 1, and at the time of each major assessment task.

4.3. Limitations of the study

During this study a number of matters emerged where the data were insufficient to draw valid findings. However, the authors believe these represent areas for fruitful, future research by scholars interested in this field.

An examination of whole cohort diagnostic testing and compulsory attendance at support programs would be useful to further validate the findings in this research. Also, while the overall impact of academic English language skills was explored in this research, it would be useful to break this down with further granularity to examine ELP as a continuum of communication skills from basic understanding of conversational English to competent comprehension for university study.

It would be informative to find out the extent to which students in the regularly attending cohort had a deep or surface orientation to learning (Biggs, 2003) so as to better understand the motivation of students in attending and not attending the USP. Other studies in this field (Cullity, 2008) have found that a strong, trusting teacher/student relationship is important for encouraging “at risk” students to participate in support programs. It would be useful to correlate, in more detail, the impact the USP had on the participation of specific ITM students.

5. Conclusions

As Yin (2003) suggests, some care needs to be exercised in generalising from our findings. It is tempting to list the attributes that would lead to “success” in studies at university. However, such a listing runs the risk of producing an identikit image rather than being a real predictor of success. The identikit student may have all the identified attributes but still not succeed. Nevertheless, the following list shows the features of students in the USP who performed better than others. More research is required to validate these findings and determine both their individual efficacy in improving student outcomes and in particular their interactions with each other. For instance, intrinsic motivation may be a factor in itself, or it may be that intrinsic motivation causes students to seek out native English speakers as friends and put greater effort into improving their English language skills.

Subject to the limitations of the study (mentioned earlier) there are a number of characteristics exposed in this research that would suggest a way for students to maximize their outcomes when considering university study. Specifically, the successful student is likely to have:

- English language competence derived from additional exposure to English language, especially academic English, such as through home stay, university clubs, sport etc. (case study 2 and the positive side of case study 3);
- Limited paid employment (less than 10 hours per week) in a job that requires the use of English (case study 3);
- Peer support, through a native English speaker (case study 3);
- Attendance at self help programs such as the USP (Kennelly, Maldoni, & Davies, 2010);
- Intrinsic motivation (case study 4);

- Some form of pre-university preparation (e.g. English for EAL students);
- Readiness/maturity/preparedness in that they have both appropriate ELP and the understanding of how USP may be able to assist them (case studies 4 and 5).

Given the foregoing analysis of the reasons for attendance and irregular attendance at the USP, it is worth noting these findings must be applied to the context of a post-Bradley era where a significantly increased number of students will be attending university with backgrounds that do not necessarily equip them for university study. The findings provide evidence for both optimism and concern; optimism for many mature age EAL students and others who generally seek opportunities such as the USP; concern because of the myriad reasons proffered by often younger students for not attending the USP.

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