

“Your brain just freaks out!” – Understanding VET articulants’ transition experience using Bourdieu’s notions of habitus and field

Pamela Delly

Student Learning, La Trobe University, Bundoora Victoria 3086, Australia

Email: p.delly@latrobe.edu.au

(Received 6 November, 2015; Published online 30 January, 2016)

In the broadening of pathways from the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector to the higher education (HE) sector, a critical intersection has occurred between the transition from one education system to another. While this transition is often described as “seamless”, this is not always the case. As a result of receiving appropriate Advanced Standing, some VET students are able to articulate directly into the second year of an undergraduate degree. In by-passing the first-year program, the point of entry in Year 2 becomes a critical intersection for these students, because they are actually in their first year of university. The literature reports that these ex-VET students experience an academic skills gap, often as a result of by-passing the Year 1 program. This study foregrounds the perspectives of the students, explores this critical intersection and confirms a skills gap. The theoretical framework for the study utilises Bourdieu’s notions of field and habitus, arguing that students’ previously successful habitus is no longer appropriate in a HE setting. It seems that students need to develop a new habitus to successfully meet the academic requirements of HE. The study predominantly uses a qualitative methodology, with twelve students from a single sector university being interviewed about the strategies used to address their reported skills gap. The findings indicate students struggled to find ways to develop their academic skills, and most managed alone, despite their university providing academic support. Importantly, students reported varying degrees of eventual success in developing the academic skills needed to succeed in their HE courses.

Key Words: Vocational Education and Training, Higher Education, transitions, first year experience, habitus.

1. Introduction

In Australia, socially inclusive policies aimed at widening participation have seen increasing numbers of students graduating from the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector and seeking pathways into higher education (HE). Some of these VET graduates receive credit for their VET studies and enter university with advanced standing. Subsequently some are able to enrol directly into subjects that form part of the second year of the undergraduate program. Throughout this paper, these students are referred to as VET articulants. In gaining credit and bypassing the first year of the degree program, these VET articulants miss out on the introductory units in which the foundations and threshold concepts for their studies are established, including important orientations to the requirements of their discipline, and to the expectations of university study. The potential disadvantage in bypassing the first year is that many of the academic skills that are required to succeed in the second year of a degree are often explicitly taught in

the first year of the program, to the extent that the first year experience (FYE) is considered a foundation and has become a feature in the design of undergraduate courses. Consequently, for these VET articulants their first year experience of university actually occurs when they are studying second year (and sometimes third year) subjects, and so they are less able to access the more traditional university supports that are made available to first year students. They also miss the introductory first-year subjects that orient them to the requirements of their discipline and the university. Further compounding the situation is that their lecturers and tutors assume because they are in second year they have completed the introductory first-year subjects and that they have the academic skills required to study successfully at second year. This can create challenges and, for some, the realisation and doubt that they may in fact be underprepared for the academic rigour of university study (Brunken & Delly 2011; Byrnes, Jackson, Paez, Blacker, & Dwyer, 2010; Cameron 2004; Watson 2006).

This research seeks to present the voices of the students who find themselves in this situation, to understand how they approach their studies when the skills they need are not explicitly taught. Due to missing what is considered an important part of the university program, these VET articulants need to find other ways to work through their transition challenges. This article explores the strategies these VET articulants employ to successfully navigate the critical intersection where students acknowledge their academic skills gap, realise the different academic expectations between HE and VET, and develop strategies to improve their academic skills. Bourdieu's theory of field is used to illustrate the changed educational setting these students enter in HE, and the notion of habitus frames the discussion that considers how students change their behaviour and approaches in order to develop their academic skills.

2. Literature

Over recent years there has been an increased focus in higher education on the transition of students into the culture and academic expectations of university study. Consequently there is considerable literature available, much of which focuses predominantly on the first year experience and universities that have become more responsive to the transition needs of first year students (Kift 2008, 2009; Krause, Hartley, James & McInnes 2005). As a result of the acknowledgement of the importance of the first year experience in HE (Bexley, 2008; Kift, 2009; Zepke et al., 2005), orientation programs have been recommended as a vital component of the FYE (Brunken & Delly, 2009; Kantanis, 2002; Kift, 2008; Krause et al., 2005). In fact there is evidence to suggest that a better-quality experience for students can be a predictor of success (Krause et al. 2005; Wilson 2009). As such, the aim of such programs has been to ensure that the first year experience is a positive one for students and if this is the case then student engagement should improve (Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), 2010; James, Krause, & Jennings, 2010; Kift, 2009).

However, nearly all of the literature focuses on orienting students who are moving directly from secondary school into university in semester one. Even when the transition literature does acknowledge the increasing diversity and increasing preparedness of students and that they may use non-traditional pathways, much of it still seems to assume that they will enter in first year and thus be able to access 'regular' orientation programs (Krause et al., 2005; Nelson, Smith & Clarke, 2012). After their ten-year study of the FYE in Australian HE, Krause et al. (2005) conclude that educators must now concern themselves with "multiple transitions" (p. 85).

So while supporting transitions into the first year of university has become a priority across higher education, this has been less true for transitions of students who follow a more oblique pathway into university study. There is some literature that considers the additional transition issues faced by such students, such as a study by Ambrose et al. (2013). In her study of mature-age students, Kantanis (2002, p. 3) acknowledges the importance of understanding that there will be 'sub-sets' within the 'en masse' group of transitioning students who 'will have additional issues of transition with which they must grapple' and which are peculiar to that sub-set. A sub-set may well be the VET articulants who are the focus of this research. Veljanovski, Murphy and Bak (2009, p. 1) observe that, while "diploma level subjects are deemed functionally equivalent to corresponding first year higher education subjects, the leap" for VET articulants

'often remains large'. When he was Vice-Chancellor of a dual sector university, Ian Young acknowledged the need to provide VET articulants with a variety of orientation and transition programs (Young, 2005), because VET articulants cannot be simply "dropped into" second year subjects (p. 6). These issues are also alluded to by Campbell, Catterall, Yang and Davis (2012), who conclude that VET students who transfer to HE required more support and guidance than students who entered HE through secondary school. Elsewhere in the literature issues faced by VET articulants are identified as acculturation to a new educational environment, academic expectations of HE, and establishing support networks (Aitchison et al., 2006; Cameron, Kennedy & O'Brien, 2000; Brunken, Delly, Willard, & Winter, 2006; Brunken & Delly, 2011; O'Shea, Lysaght & Tanner, 2012). Another issue faced by transfer students is identified in the American literature and is referred to as "transfer shock". The research has shown that students transferring from community colleges often experience a drop in their grade point average in the first or second semesters at university (Diaz, 1992; Townsend, 1995). Interestingly, Diaz (1992) goes on to report that most students eventually regain some or all of their lost GPA (p. 285).

The academic preparation of these non-traditional students is also the focus of some discussion in the Wellman Report (2002) on American community colleges which suggests that a predictor of academic success for students transferring into HE courses is "rigorous academic preparation in high school" (p. vi). The problem Wellman identifies is that there are students who transfer from community colleges into HE in America who do not have this type of preparation. It would seem reasonable to suggest that a similar lack of preparation would be experienced by some Australian VET students transferring to HE. In a University of Tasmania study, Reinks and Taylor (2009) highlighted the diversity and lack of preparedness of at-risk students, that included, among others, those admitted into an Associate Degree (rather than a full undergraduate degree) (p. 4). Such students, according to O'Shea, Lysaght and Tanner (2012), enroll in VET courses as a pathway into HE as they do not have the academic requirements to follow a more traditional pathway. Reinks and Taylor (2009) suggest that "many of the at risk students were ill-equipped and under-prepared for a university environment" (p. 9). Another factor that may explain the under-preparedness of these students could be that both students and teachers in VET agree that "students ... were often 'spoon fed' with hand outs and notes, liberal discussion and individual help" (Aitchison et al., 2006, p. 4). This is very different to the academic approach and assessment practices in HE where students are expected to study independently and work is submitted once and a grade is allocated on the basis of this submission. There is also a difference in VET where students are able to re-submit an assessment if it is not satisfactory in the first instance. Potter and Parkinson (2010) also point out that issues can occur for students as their previous educational setting may have carefully supported them.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Bourdieu

For some, the theories of Bourdieu may seem dated for understanding phenomena in the twenty-first century. However, at a time when Australian HE is adjusting to an increasingly deregulated HE market, while also striving to implement the Bradley Review requirements that universities increase their intake of low SES students (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2008), the financial implications for students and the potential for inequality for these students, has become cause for much discussion (Dow, 2015; Norton, 2015; Pash, 2014; James, 2002). Australian HE today is very different to the world Bourdieu examined and yet with the increasing student cost of HE, combined with the push for a more inclusive HE system, perhaps Bourdieu's theories still have much to offer. A considerable amount of Bourdieu's work argued that education reinforced the dominant social milieu of the time and that the majority of students entering higher education reflected this. He observed that people such as farmers, workers, craftsmen and tradespeople had limited access to higher education, while the majority of higher education places were occupied by children of the "dominant classes" (Bourdieu, 1973, p. 86). Likewise the Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education (DEEWR, 2008) observed that, "Australia has not provided equal access to all groups from society" (p. 27). Despite it being seven years since Bradley's recommendations to increase partic-

ipation by low SES students, there is still evidence of inequity. In Watson, Hagel and Chesters' study (2013), they found that the Group of 8 universities is among a group of fourteen universities enrolling an average of 3% of students with a VET award (p. 15), despite enrolling 38% of all commencing undergraduate students. This group of universities consider themselves to be the leading universities in Australia based on their research, industry links, quality of academic staff, and their graduate outcomes (Australian Education Network (AEN), 2015). In contrast, Charles Sturt University, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT), and the University of Western Sydney's (UWS) rate of admission of VET award holders is over 28% (p. 10). RMIT has its focus on practical outcomes of its courses (AEN, 2015), while Charles Sturt University is a 26 year old, regional university (Charles Sturt University, 2015), and UWS also 25 years old is 'young' in university terms (AEN, 2015). These three are in a group of seven universities enrolling 24% of all commencing students (Watson, Hagel & Chesters, 2014, p. 14). One possible explanation offered in the study is that the Group of 8 universities were admitting VET award holders, albeit in low numbers, simply as a response to government initiatives and potential funding as they had no need to seek students (Watson, Hagel & Chesters, 2014, p. 25). It seems evident then that there are many universities that are yet to embrace widening participation, when the most prestigious universities in Australia are still dominated by students from higher socio-economic groups similarly to how French HE, as observed by Bourdieu, was dominated by students from the social elite.

As a framework to this study, Bourdieu's field theory is used to articulate and subsequently problematise a situation that appears to have been accepted as non-problematic. It is often believed that there is a seamless pathway for students to articulate from VET into HE (Cram & Watson, 2008; Milne, Keating & Glaisher, 2007; Moodie, 2004; Watson, 2006), and enroll directly into second year as a result of their VET studies. For many universities this is not the case. In fact, HE in Australia appears to be in a state of flux where many of its practices are still the same as they were before the massification of HE, despite the fact that the nature of the student cohort has changed with many more non-traditional students entering universities through different pathways and with different levels of academic preparedness. Bourdieu (1974) also observed:

The system can take in an increasingly large number of pupils ... without having to change profoundly, provided that the newcomers are also in possession of the socially acquired aptitudes which the school traditionally demands. On the other hand, it is bound to experience crises (which it will describe as 'a lowering of standards') when it takes an increasingly large number of pupils who have not acquired the same mastery as their predecessors of the cultural heritage of their social classes. (p. 41)

While some would suggest that there is no crisis in the system, there is nevertheless a problem when at least one student cohort finds themselves unprepared for the rigours of university study because they lack the "aptitudes" demanded by HE. It is also true that students who enter university through the more traditional first year pathway may not have the necessary aptitudes, however universities are more responsive to this possibility and thus transition pedagogies are often in place for first year students (FYS). Even with HE's massification, the structures and pedagogies of old are largely intact: lectures and tutorials are didactically presented by the experts; written assessments that are judged in terms of the quality of the research done and the scholarly nature of the language used (and more often than not it is written language presented in essays). While there are some changes creeping into university assessments and classroom approaches (such as group work on authentic and rich tasks) the expectation is still that a certain 'academic standard' will be produced by the students in order to succeed. It is not being suggested here that academic standards are unimportant, however the requirements of academic discourse can unnecessarily disadvantage students who have not accessed HE through more traditional pathways. Such students may have had limited or no experience with written assessments, and yet HE often assumes they are familiar with the conventions of academic discourse. If these conventions are not made explicit, non-traditional students may be disadvantaged.

3.2. Bourdieu’s concepts

In order to argue that class divisions were perpetuated in both society and in education, Bourdieu developed a theory and terminology that is used here as the basis of this research. Bourdieu’s notions of field, Cultural Capital and habitus are explained, and the theory is applied to the situation of the VET articulants.

3.2.1. *Field*

A field, according to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) is:

a network, or a configuration of objective relations between positions. These positions are objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants ...by their present and potential situation (*situs*) in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions.” (p. 97)

It can be deduced from this that all fields differ because the occupants will differ, as will the various powers that influence a particular field and its occupants.

3.2.2. *Cultural capital*

The positions of the various agents within a field are in part determined by the cultural capital they possess and its relative worth within a given field. Bourdieu (1986) identifies three forms of cultural capital: embodied, objectified and institutionalized. The embodied cultural capital exists in the form of “long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body” (p. 47); objectified cultural capital takes its form in objects such as books and paintings; while in its institutionalized state in this context it is seen in educational qualifications. Within the field of HE the most powerful cultural capital is in its institutional form, which is embodied in the academic qualifications needed in order to gain entry to an educational field.

3.2.3. *Habitus*

Habitus is important within the field as it can determine how an agent within a field plays the game. According to Bourdieu (1998), habitus is a disposition which results from “the internalization of objective structures and schemes of action which orient the perception of the situation and the appropriate response” (p. 25). The development of habitus is the result of the social relations that are experienced over time including the important influences of both family and school (Reed-Danahay, 2005) – it is not taught or learnt; rather it is inculcated. Thus habitus influences and is evident in a person’s actions, attitudes and perceptions but it is not fixed because it is constantly exposed to further influences and experiences that will tend to reinforce or modify it – “it is durable but not eternal!” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 133). However, in the face of new situations, the primary habitus may no longer be useful and perhaps becomes “dysfunctional”, which can lead to a difficulty in “adjusting to the new established order” (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 161). Consequently, a new habitus must be developed in order to cope with the new situation and while this is possible it is not always successful (Bourdieu, 2000). This study suggests that this is the case as VET articulants realize that when they encounter a new educational field, the habitus that has previously facilitated their success in VET has become dysfunctional for guiding their experiences in HE. Yet without an understanding of the rules for the new field, the strategies for playing the game may well be limited. As Roberts and Reid (2014) suggest, “transition to a new and more pragmatic habitus” may depend on understanding that there are varying rules for different fields and an ability to “take on the new rules” (p. 80).

3.3. Position in the field and habitus – second year VET articulants

For the purpose of this study, the particular field of interest is the second year of an undergraduate degree program at an Australian university. In the past, entry to the second year of an undergraduate degree program was usually only granted once a student had satisfactorily completed the first year of that degree. So the main type of capital used for entry to the field was students’

previous successful results within the university. However, changes to government policy now allow students to use their previous VET studies as capital to enter Year 2 of an undergraduate degree. In contrast to their counterparts who enrol into Year 1, the VET articulants who enrol directly into second year have a relatively weaker position in the field for a variety of reasons. Students who have completed the traditional first year will have been informed of the rules of the game – perhaps with the most important being that their academic success will be judged on the basis of the mastery of particular academic skills. This is not to suggest however that FYS will fully understand the rules, yet they will at least have been informed. In addition, FYS are also introduced to the academic skills they will need to succeed in HE, usually introduced through transitional first year pedagogies. Again, this does not guarantee mastery, however FYS have the advantage of exposure to pedagogical approaches that explicitly acknowledge the academic expectations of HE. In contrast however, upon entering directly into second year, VET articulants are rarely made aware of the rules of the new game in HE and that their existing cultural capital is not a firm foundation for their academic success. In fact, their cultural capital provides only a position in the field, a chance to play the game. It is their habitus that may well be more significant to their success, because it enables students to generate strategies that can be used to function in a particular field (Bourdieu, 1993). The habitus of the VET articulants appears on face value to put them at a considerable disadvantage in a game which relies heavily on academic preparedness and adherence to set structures of written communication and research – academic writing, referencing styles, acknowledging the work of others, critical reading and thinking.

4. Methodology

The focus of this research is a suburban, single sector university, classified by Marginson and Considine (2000) as a gumtree university. Henceforth it will be referred to as Suburban Gumtree University (SGU).

This study uses a mixed methods approach, where data were collected in a two-stage process. The first stage of the study used a quantitative methodology and collected data from a sample of students via a questionnaire (N=23). The aim of this data set was to inform the areas for discussion in Stage 2 of the study. The second qualitative stage of the study involved semi-structured interviews (N=12) to obtain in-depth information about the experiences of students from this sample.

4.1. Sample

Domestic undergraduate students transferring from VET and enrolling directly into second year of a Business Management or Nursing degree (Division 2 conversion) provided the sample for this study. At SGU, these courses were identified because they commonly have VET enrolments directly into Year 2. The criteria for participants were that they were domestic VET transfers with Advanced Standing, who had also bypassed introductory subjects (those offered in Year 1/Semesters 1 and 2). These students are likely to have moved directly into Year 2/Semester 1 or Semester 2.

Purposive sampling was used to recruit students to complete the hard copy questionnaires. For the qualitative section of the study, twelve students volunteered to participate in the one-to-one, semi-structured interviews. Because participants were required to meet quite specific criteria as outlined here, critical case sampling was used to ensure that the sample met these (Collins, 2011). Also, because the sample was largely unknown to the researcher, questionnaire respondents were asked to self-identify for the semi-structured interviews based on a number of criteria. As a non-random sample of students was interviewed, the findings are transferable but not generalizable because the data will relate to a specific situation (Schofield, 2002).

4.2. Data collection tools

Stage 1: Quantitative

A two-part questionnaire was used. Part A of the questionnaire was designed to elicit demographic information such as VET course, university course, age, gender, NESB background, parents' educational status. Responses to Part A were predominantly 'tick the box,' involving the selection of appropriate corresponding sub-divisions within categories.

Part B of the questionnaire sought to identify whether the students perceived an academic skills gap; the types of support they may have accessed; and strategies used to develop their academic skills. This section of the questionnaire was developed based on an extensive review of the literature, and the experiences of the researcher as a practitioner and academic, in teaching and supporting varied and diverse cohorts of students. Questions were developed which aimed to identify the academic skills that students believed they already had when they came to university. A list of seven skills was provided (see following), that were identified as being necessary for successful completion of university assessment tasks. The list included writing essays, writing reports, referencing correctly, identifying academic texts, finding academic texts, reading academic texts and critically analysing academic texts. Participants were asked to indicate the skills they believed they had when they first enrolled in their university course. Part B of the questionnaire required some 'tick the box' responses and one four-point Likert scale response. No free text in-depth responses were required in the questionnaire.

Stage 2: Qualitative

The data collection tool used in the qualitative stage of the project was one-to-one, semi-structured interviews. The aim of these interviews was to enable the researcher to build a detailed picture of the experiences of the sample, from the in-depth data obtained. The interviews were sound recorded, fully transcribed and analysed on the basis of emergent themes.

5. Findings and Discussion

This section of the paper presents both the quantitative and qualitative findings from this study, with greater emphasis on the findings of the interview participants (N=12), as these represent the voice of the students that is the focus of this research. In order to maintain the anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms are used.

5.1. Quantitative findings

Descriptive statistics based on the questionnaires revealed that VET articulants (N=23) in this study perceived they had an academic skills gap. Participants were provided with a list of options to complete the following, "When I first came to university I ..." and were asked to answer either 'yes' or 'no'. For the purposes of this paper, only four of the academic skills identified are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Reported skills gap.

Academic skill	Yes	No
	% (no.)	% (no.)
... could write essays	74% (17)	26% (6)
... could identify and read academic texts	17% (4)	83% (19)
... could locate an academic text	9% (2)	91% (21)
... could reference correctly	13% (3)	87% (20)

A significant issue with the perceived skills gap is that these students are already enrolled in their second year of a degree course, where it is assumed (by lecturers and tutors) that their stu-

dents will have the necessary academic skills to complete assessment tasks. As many HE assessments are essay based, the students who reported being unable to write an essay face a potential disadvantage. Further compounding the problem is that 83% reported being unable to identify an academic text, with 91% unable to locate an academic text. With the expectation in HE that academic writing is evidence-based, this too places these students at a disadvantage. This reflects the theme in the existing literature that suggests that VET students do encounter a gap in disciplinary knowledge and in skills (Aitchison et al., 2006).

5.2. Qualitative findings

Based on the questionnaire findings, the interviews explored the transition experiences of the sample, in particular the strategies they used to address their academic skills gap. These findings revealed that these VET articulants were largely unaware that in moving from VET to HE, there were also significant changes in academic expectations. Most of the participants indicated that they realised that there would be changes in the educational setting and possibly work load; few reported being aware of the shift from competency-based learning to education with a theoretical and evidence-based knowledge focus. The majority, however, did come to this realisation after they began studying in HE and in particular after they had begun to submit and receive lecturer feedback and marks for their assessment tasks. So in moving from one educational field (VET) to another (HE), initially these students were not fully aware that the rules of the game were somewhat different and as such the habitus that had served them well in VET was no longer appropriate or productive. It seems then that the rules they needed to succeed in HE were not explicitly available to them as second year students. These rules are often clearly established during the more traditional first-year transition programs and through transition pedagogies that seek to scaffold skills and introduce students into the requirements of their discipline. In second year, however, they form part of knowledge and skills that are assumed of students and therefore are not made explicit.

5.2.1. *The rules are different - awareness of a problem – your brain freaks out*

All of the VET articulants interviewed felt confident when they came to university, although many also felt nervous. Because most of the sample had been high achievers in VET, they felt that their transition to university would pose few problems, with Louise believing she would, “breeze through university”. Given that most felt confident coming to university, for some then, their early weeks at university were more of an issue than they had anticipated. Neil reported feeling “very confronted emotionally and psychologically with that transfer from VET to HE, and at times I felt very uncertain about whether I was going to succeed with this transition or not”. In a similar vein, early in her studies Lena says she “didn’t know what to do, didn’t know what the expectation was”. She described how she was:

Just going through the motions, trying to piece together and work out how I was meant to set my day out, how I was meant to understand assignments, how I was meant to understand even the workshops and labs. What we were meant to read, what we weren’t meant to read.

For these VET articulants these early weeks at university marked the clear differences for them between VET and university, differences that many had not expected. This realisation, and for some their poor assessment results, signalled the need to change their approaches to study. In order to remain in the game, their habitus would need to be adjusted to incorporate the emerging rules of HE and the changed academic expectations required for HE success.

While most eventually realised that their VET habitus was no longer relevant or useful in HE, learning the new rules was not always straightforward. For many, they struggled to discover what was expected of them academically and for most, this realisation occurred when they received grades for their first written assessment tasks. As suggested in the literature (Diaz, 1992; Townsend, 1995), “transfer shock” was experienced by most of the sample, with all but one of the interviewees reporting a drop in grades in their first semester. With this came the realisation that the skills and approaches to study that had enabled their success in VET were no longer leading to successful outcomes in HE. Having almost failed her first assessment at university,

Jackie remembers thinking, "Oh this is **not good** [her emphasis] ... am [I even] going to survive with these marks". She was both "disappointed and confused" with her results because she did not understand the reason for the drop in her grades after her successful VET studies. Jenny also observed that compared to VET, her grades were dropping but like Jackie, she did not know why. She recalled thinking "how can they be dropping? What am I doing wrong?" She reported giving "110%" to her studies but this did not help. Jenny eventually realised that her grades were poor because she lacked academic skills such as appropriate essay structure and use of evidence. These were not required in her VET assessments so she had little if any experience of them.

Edward's ignorance of the new rules, and his reliance on previous approaches to study that led to his success in VET, seem to highlight this issue. When preparing for his HE first exam, Edward relied on his VET habitus, "reading and memorising". He reported doing this "because this is how I have been trained in the past [at VET] ... this is the text book and this is what you have to learn". He felt so confident that this was appropriate and that the rules were the same as they were in VET, that even when his classmate (who had completed first year) explained a better approach, Edward dismissed this advice. Unfortunately, Edward only realised that his was inappropriate when he sat the exam, and acknowledged, "I prepared a lot of material that wasn't relevant and I didn't focus on [material] that was relevant". Consequently his grade was "very low", but he added "that's how I learned that I actually did the wrong thing" and he never approached an exam in the same way again. He then sought to "adjust to the new established order" Bourdieu (2000), and this eventually led to a change in habitus.

The interviewees also discussed the difficulties they faced when they encountered completely unfamiliar assessment requirements. Jackie, for example, describes her reaction to the first time she realized she would have to complete a 2,000 word essay in second year. "Your brain just freaks out!" because she had never had to write more than 300 word responses during her VET studies. Nora also expressed concern over the word length of university essays, explaining that she would think more about the word length than she would about the content, using the same sentence over and over to try and reach the word limit. Both these students had difficulties adjusting to these "new and unforeseen situations" (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 87); however, they did manage the adjustment eventually. It seems, for example, that although Nora realised her previous habitus was not leading to successful results she was unsure of how to change it because, as for Edward, the adjustments were limited by her previous habitus. Towards the end of second year after failing an essay, Nora was referred by her lecturer to an essay-writing workshop run by the Academic Language and Learning unit. It was here that she realised she had not mastered academic writing at all, and observed that she felt her writing had not improved at all throughout second year (her first year of university). She also made the comment that this was because she had been writing essays based on what she had learned at both high school and VET, which had virtually no requirements for extended academic writing. The workshop explained the mistakes she had been making and she finally understood what was expected of her in terms of academic writing. Hence through the development of her academic skills she had the tools that contributed to a shift in her habitus.

5.2.2. Overcoming the problem - a shift in habitus

Often assessment requirements seem to rely on previously understood knowledge and behaviours, the cultural capital and habitus that enable students to adjust successfully to their university experience. This capital and habitus are exhibited in knowledge and skills that include writing an academic essay; thinking critically about the literature or acknowledging sources; and behaviours such as seeking help or understanding that the educational culture is in fact different from the one they were in previously. Bourdieu (1971) suggests culture is a "common set of previously assimilated master patterns from which ... an infinite number of individual patterns directly applicable to specific situations are generated" (p. 192).

For many of the interviewees the shift in their habitus was not always the result of conscious decisions to change behaviour and/or attitudes, but rather it came about as they struggled to develop their academic skills. The students used various strategies to develop their academic

skills, all with varying degrees of success. These students then, were casting aside some of their previously assimilated 'master patterns' in favour of newly assimilated master patterns that were appropriate to HE. These 'patterns' may be approaches to assessment tasks, strategies to develop skills, expectations of educational settings, and attitudes to their studies.

Lisa, for example, would observe other students who had completed the traditional first year, and watch their behaviour in tutorials. When a skill that had not been explicitly taught in second year was expected of students, Lisa would target students who had completed first year and ask them questions to confirm her understanding, observing that she was "relying on the people who had done first year". She seemed to understand that these students had a more appropriate habitus to succeed in HE than the habitus she had developed in school and in VET. Jenny and Jackie would also target students who had completed first year and read their essays to see how they had structured their work. They both believed this was important in their understanding of how to write an academic essay. Jackie believed that the more she worked with other students, the more "her grades and writing started to improve". In particular she used students who had completed first year to learn more about academic expectations. She began to model what she was observing, picking up "little tidbits on how to reference" and thinking "that person structures their work like that and they got good marks. Maybe I can [do that too]". She believed that this approach contributed to her marks "improving dramatically". This suggests that the habitus to succeed in second year was already somewhat evident in those who had completed first year, and the VET articulants realised – whether consciously or not – the importance of that habitus in their own success in the game.

In contrast, Theresa still seems to be struggling to understand the habitus that will enable her to succeed at university. She remembered being required to do a "little bit of academic research at TAFE"; however, she went on to comment that she

felt that it wasn't necessary because I think that when you're writing something it's about you and not about someone else. So I don't like that even here at uni, I feel like my opinion, because it's my essay, so my opinion matters more ... that's what I think. So that's why it's a bit hard for me to understand the whole literature reviews and all that.

Louise, on the other hand, realised early in her university studies that "I sort of actually have to find something to back up what I'm saying. And I think that's really important too because nursing is based around evidence-based practice. It makes sense to find people that know what they're talking about". So while Theresa's habitus seems to have barely shifted in HE, Louise's habitus shows evidence of adjusting to her new situation.

Many of the interviewees discussed using friends or family for support in their academic endeavours and this appears to have contributed to a change in habitus. However, they seemed highly selective when seeking support from friends and family. Interviewees actively sought out friends and family they believed could assist them in developing their skills. As a consequence, this skills development seemed to contribute to a shift in their habitus that contributed to more success in their HE studies. Louise, for example, explained the importance of talking to friends who had completed university degrees in her discipline, in order to understand what was expected of her. On one occasion Louise thought she had completed "a brilliant essay" based on a nursing assessment scenario, only to be told by a friend that she had not answered the question. Her friend explained that Louise had addressed the nursing problem from a VET perspective rather than a HE one. She had described a proposed patient treatment, rather than analysing why this would be the best treatment in the given situation. Once this had been explained to her she began to understand how to change her approach and thinking, and therefore her academic skills, to improve her grades. Eric also relied heavily on his brothers who had completed Business degrees. When Eric realised his attempts at academic writing were not adequate, because he could not write "a proper essay ... no introduction, body, conclusion," he believed his brothers would be able to help him. Eric attributed the development of his skills to the advice and knowledge he received from them, "it all came from [them]".

5.2.3. Previous educational experiences influence habitus

A number of interviewees discussed how their previous educational experiences influenced their approaches to university; this includes their attitudes to success and failure, and their expectations of HE.

Many interviewees discussed the expectation that the HE learning environment would be the same as that experienced in VET. Among the main features of VET that students valued was the class discussions of content and also being able to approach their teachers for assistance both in and out of class. They discussed this as being an important part of their knowledge and skills development. Nora, for example, "really liked [VET classes] because they'd give the lecture and you could discuss what was going on. I kind of retain stuff better like that". In contrast, Nora would attend workshops at university to "try and get information" from her lecturers but "found that they weren't very helpful to be honest" because she was just told to "do the reading", when she had already done that. As a result, Nora stopped relying on her lecturers to provide information.

Because many had anticipated a similar learning environment in HE, they then relied on their previous habitus when they first experienced problems. For a number of interviewees, a significant problem was the transition from dependent to independent learning and for some this proved to be a struggle. Nora mentioned that there was little self-directed learning during her VET studies, and this was echoed in the comments of other interviewees who talked of being "spoon-fed" or being told by their teacher which book to use for an assessment or a test. Neil commented that in VET, "everything was sort of served to you, almost on a platter if you like". So when they entered HE, having to find this information themselves was an area that caused interviewees problems. Some used the same approach they had used in VET, seeking help from their lecturers, but with limited success. Neil tried this a few times, and revealed, "I tried to approach some lecturers, but to be honest with you they just knocked me back". Following this, Neil realised that his previous behaviours were no longer useful in HE with his new lecturers. From this, emerged an understanding that this approach would have to change and he would need to become much more self-sufficient in HE – an important element of a HE habitus. On the other hand, Theresa, late in her second year still seemed to be struggling with behaviours that were not helping her to succeed in HE. She lamented, "there's not a lot of help given [at university]. Like at TAFE they would like show you exactly what to do then you would have to go off and do it on your own ... So I think that sort of [academic] stuff they need to tell us". It is evident from these comments that she does not fully grasp that becoming an independent learner is an important element of success in HE. It seems then that her habitus is not yet developing to suit her current educational setting. In contrast, some realised immediately that their expectation that HE would be similar to VET in terms of support was unfounded. Jenny talks about not being told about independent learning but of getting "the vibe straight off the bat ... they [lecturers] don't mind if you don't turn up to lectures ... they don't have any responsibility ... It's all on you".

Louise also discussed how the successful habitus she developed during her VET clinical practicums emerged as a problem when she relied on it in HE. She described being competent in her VET practicums and so she brought these same behaviours to her HE clinical practicums. However, based on supervisor feedback, Louise discovered that she was not doing as well in her HE practicums as she believed, because she was using an approach that was no longer adequate. At the time of the interview, Louise was employing strategies to change her behaviours and approaches during practicums.

6. Conclusion

At a point of disjunction, where students' previous skills and approaches to study (their VET habitus) were at odds with what was now expected, the students in this study realised that changes to their existing understanding of studying (existing habitus) were vital if they were to succeed in HE. As a consequence of this realisation, these VET articulants analysed what they perceived to be the obstacles to their success in HE. For most, their perception was simply a gap

in their academic skills. As they sought to successfully close this gap, not only were they developing their academic skills; they were also shifting their habitus from one that had served them well in VET to one that would facilitate their success in their new field of study in HE. Bourdieu believed that habitus was inculcated through the immersion of the lived experience and could not be taught and yet it would seem that these VET articulants were consciously seeking to learn new behaviours and skills. Many began observing other students, seeking help from family and friends, and reading examples of academic writing, all in an effort to improve their academic skills. Various academic skills were certainly learnt as a result, such as the ability to write academically or reference correctly; however, there was also an important accompanying change in their habitus – to think critically, analyse literature, research widely, to study independently. Without this change in habitus, their success in HE may be problematic.

References

- Aitchison, C., Catterall, J., Dockett, S., & Perry, B. (2006). Making it mainstream; engaging students who articulate from Vocational Education and Training (VET). Presented at *First Year in Higher Education Conference*. Retrieved from http://www.fyhe.com.au/past_papers/2006/Papers/Catterall.pdf
- Ambrose, I., Bonne, M., Chanock, K., Cunnington, C., Jardine, S., & Muller, J. (2013). “Like catching smoke”: Easing the transition from TAFE to university. *Journal of Academic Language and Learning*, 7(2), A120-A131. Retrieved from <http://journal.aall.org.au/index.php/jall/article/view/257/174>
- Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). (2010). *Doing more for learning: Enhancing engagement and outcomes. Australian survey of student engagement*. Australian student engagement report. Camberwell, Australia: ACER.
- Australian Education Network. (2015). *Groupings of Australian Universities*. Retrieved from <http://www.australianuniversities.com.au/directory/australian-university-groupings/>
- Bexley, E. (2008). *The first year experience at La Trobe University*. Melbourne: Centre for the Study of Higher Education. Retrieved from <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/students/assets/downloads/Report-LTU-first-year-experience-2007.pdf>
- Bourdieu, P. (1971). Systems of education and systems of thought. In M. Young (Ed.), *Knowledge and control. New directions for the sociology of education* (pp. 189-207). London, UK: Collier-Macmillan Publishers.
- Bourdieu, P. (1973). Cultural reproduction and social reproduction. In R. Brown (Ed.), *Knowledge, education and cultural change. Papers in the sociology of education*. London, England: Tavistock Publications.
- Bourdieu, P. (1974). The school as a conservative force: scholastic and cultural inequalities. In J. Eggleston (Ed.), *Contemporary research in the sociology of education* (pp.32-46). Cambridge, UK: Methuen.
- Bourdieu, P. (1993). *Sociology in question*. London, UK: Sage.
- Bourdieu, P. (1998). *Practical reason*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Bourdieu, P. (2000). *Pascalian meditations*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Bourdieu, P., & Wacquant, L. J. D., (1992). *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Brunken, A., & Delly, P. (2009). Can business principles be adapted to higher education to improve the provision of study support to diverse student cohorts? *The International Journal of Learning*, 16(4), 13-26. Retrieved from <http://arrow.latrobe.edu.au:8080/vital/access/HandleResolver/1959.9/114649>
- Brunken, A., & Delly, P. (2011). Access to success. *Education, Knowledge & Economy*, 4(3), 143-155.

- Brunken, A., Delly, P., Willard, P., & Winter, C. (2006). *Developing a more holistic approach to transition by using an approach which embeds Academic Language and Learning support staff into a University teaching team at La Trobe*. [A report for the School of Sport, Tourism and Hospitality Management]. Bundoora, Australia.
- Byrnes, J., Jackson, A., Paez, D., Blacker, J. & Dwyer, C. (2010). *Results of consultations with Queensland tertiary education providers. Full report*. University of Southern Queensland.
- Cameron, H. (2004). Paving the Way? The path to Uni for TAFE students. Paper presented at *the Inaugural Pacific Rim - First Year in Higher Education Conference*. Retrieved from http://www.fyhe.com.au/past_papers/papers04.htm
- Cameron, H., Kennedy, R., & O'Brien, B. (2000). TAFE to University – pathway or puzzle? *Learning together, working together: building communities in the 21st century: proceedings of the 8th International Conference on Post-Compulsory Education and Training*. Brisbane: Australian Academic Press.
- Campbell, S., Catterall, J. Yang, D. F., & Davis, J. (2012). *Enhancing the student experience: transition from vocational education and training to higher education. Final report*. Australian Learning and Teaching Council. Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.
- Charles Sturt University. (2015). *Twenty-five year anniversary*. Retrieved from <http://www.csu.edu.au/25-years/25-years>
- Collins, K.M.T. (2011). Advanced sampling designs in mixed research. Current practices and emerging trends in the social and behavioral sciences. In A. Tashakkori & C. Teddlie (Eds.), *Sage handbook of mixed methods research in social and behavioral research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Cram, B., & Watson, L. (2008). *Managing credit transfer from TAFE to university: the case for cross-sectoral collaboration*. Paper presented at the Australian Vocational Education and Training Research Association Conference. Retrieved from <http://www.avetra.org.au/AVETRA%20WORK%2011.04.08/CS2.2%20-%20Barbara%20Cram%20&%20Louise%20Watson.pdf>
- Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). (2008). *Review of Australian Higher Education: Final Report*. Canberra: DEEWR. Retrieved from http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Review/Documents/PDF/Higher%20Education%20Review_one%20document_02.pdf
- Department of Education Employment and Training (DEEWR). (2008). *Review of Australian Higher Education: Final Report*. Canberra: DEEWR. Retrieved from http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Review/Documents/PDF/Higher%20Education%20Review_one%20document_02.pdf
- Diaz, P. E. (1992). Effects of transfer on academic performance of community college students at the four-year institution. *Community Junior College Research Quarterly of Research and Practice*, 16(3), 279-291. doi:10.1080/0361697920160307
- Dow, C. 2015. *Reform of the higher education demand driven system (revised)*. Budget Review 2014-15 index. Parliament of Australia. Retrieved from http://www.aph.gov.au/about_parliament/parliamentary_departments/parliamentary_library/pubs/rp/budgetreview201415/higheredu
- James, R. (2002). *Socioeconomic background and higher education participation: An analysis of school students aspirations and expectations*. Centre for the Study of Higher Education. University of Melbourne. Department of Science, Education and Training. Retrieved from https://cshe.unimelb.edu.au/research/equity/docs/eip02_5.pdf
- James, R., Krause, K. & Jennings, C. (2010). *The First Year Experience in Australian Universities: Findings from 1994 to 2009*. Centre for the Study of Higher Education. The University of Melbourne and Griffith Institute for Higher Education, Griffith University. Retrieved from

- http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/research/experience/docs/FYE_Report_1994_to_2009.pdf.
- Kantanis, T. (2002). Same or different: Issues that affect mature age undergraduate students' transition to university. Paper presented at the *Sixth Pacific Rim - First Year in Higher Education Conference*. Christchurch, New Zealand. Retrieved from http://www.fyhe.com.au/past_papers/papers02.htm
- Kift, S. (2008). The next, great first year challenge: Sustaining, coordinating and embedding coherent institution-wide approaches to enact the FYE as "everybody's business". In *Proceedings 11th International Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference*, Hobart. Retrieved from <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/14401/1/14401.pdf>
- Kift, S. (2009). *Articulating a transition pedagogy to scaffold and to enhance the first year learning experience in Australian higher education. Final Report for ALTC Senior Fellowship Program*. Queensland: Australian Learning and Teaching Council. Retrieved from http://www.fyhe.qut.edu.au/transitionpedagogy/reportsandre/documents/Kift_Sally_ALT_C_Senior_Fellowship_Report_Sep_09.pdf
- Krause, K., Hartley, R., James, R., & McInnes, C. (2005). *The first year experience in Australian universities: Findings from a decade of national studies*. Centre for the Study of Higher Education. University of Melbourne. Retrieved from http://www.griffith.edu.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0006/37491/FYEReport05.pdf
- Marginson, S., & Considine, M. (2000). *The enterprise university: power, governance and reinvention in Australia*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Milne, L., Keating, S., & Glaisher, S. (2007). Articulation in a dual sector university: changing contexts, changing relationships. Paper presented at the *Australian Vocational Education and Training Research Association Conference*. Retrieved from <http://avetra.org.au/documents/68-Milne.pdf>
- Moodie, G. (2004). *Transfer of roles and students between VET and Higher Education*. Retrieved from http://rmit.academia.edu/GavinMoodie/Papers/326082/Transfer_of_Roles_and_Students_Between_VET_and_Higher_Education
- Nelson, K.J., Smith, J.E., & Clarke, J.A. (2012). Enhancing the transition of commencing students into university: an institution-wide approach. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 31(2), 185-199. doi:10.1080/07294360.2011.556108
- Nelson, K.J., Smith, J.E., & Clarke, J.A. (2012). Enhancing the transition of commencing students into university: an institution-wide approach. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 31(2), 185-199. doi:10.1080/07294360.2011.556108
- Norton, A. 2015. Demand-driven higher ed reform possible without fee deregulation. *The Conversation*. March 5, 2015. Retrieved from <http://theconversation.com/demand-driven-higher-ed-reform-possible-without-fee-deregulation-38306>
- O'Shea, S, Lysaght, P., & Tanner, K. (2012). Stepping into higher education from the vocational education sector in Australia: student perceptions and experiences. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 64(3), 261-277. doi:10.1080/13636820.2012.691532
- Pash, C. (2014). The cost of getting a university degree in Australia is about to change: here's what you need to know. *Business Insider Australia*. June 2, 2014. Retrieved from <http://www.businessinsider.com.au/the-cost-of-getting-a-university-degree-in-australia-is-about-to-change-heres-what-you-need-to-know-2014-6>
- Potter, A., & Parkinson, A. (2010). First year at risk intervention pilot project: an intervention to support first year students experiencing early assessment failure. Refereed paper *13th Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference* (Adelaide, 27-30 June, 2010).
- Reed-Danahay, D. (2005). *Locating Bourdieu*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

- Roberts, M.L., & Reid, K. (2014). Using Bourdieu to think about tertiary learning advice consultation. *Journal of Academic Language and Learning*, 8(1), A70-A82. Retrieved from <http://journal.aall.org.au/index.php/jall/article/view/312>
- Reinks, J., & Taylor, S. (2009). Attrition and academic performance of students identified as at-risk using administrative data alone. Refereed paper *Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference* (Townsville, 29 June-1 July, 2009).
- Schofield, J.W. (2002). Increasing the generalizability of qualitative research. In A.M. Huberman & M.B. Miles (Eds.), *The qualitative researcher's companion* (pp. 205-215). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Townsend, B. K. (1995). Community college transfer students: a case study of survival. *Review of Higher Education*, 18(2), 175-193.
- Veljanovski, A., Murphy, H., & Bak, T. (2009, June/July). What if second year is your first? Supporting VE to HE pathway students in a law based subject. Paper presented at *First Year in Higher Education Conference*, 29 June-1 July 2009. Retrieved from http://www.fyhe.com.au/past_papers/papers09/content/pdf/3C.pdf
- Watson, L. (2006). Barriers to successful transitions from VET to HE – a case study of student pathways in early childhood education and care. Paper presented at *the Ninth Annual Conference of the Australian Vocational Education and Training Research Association* (AVETRA). Retrieved from <http://www.canberra.edu.au/?a=130141>
- Watson, L., Hagel, P., & Chesters, J. (2013). *A half-open door. Pathways for VET award holders into Australian universities*. The Education Institute. University of Canberra. NCVER, South Australia. Retrieved from <http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2659.html>
- Wellman, J. V. (2002). *State policy and community college–baccalaureate transfer*. San Jose and Washington: The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education and The Institute for Higher Education Policy. Retrieved from <http://www.csn.edu/PDFFiles/Counseling%20and%20Transfer/NACADA%202009/Higher%20Education%20Transfer%20Report.pdf>
- Wilson, K. (2009). Success in first year. The impact of institutional, programmatic and personal interventions on an effective and sustainable first-year student experience. Paper presented at *First-Year in Higher Education Conference*, Townsville, Queensland, Australia. Retrieved from http://www.fyhe.com.au/past_papers/papers09/ppts/Keithia_Wilson_paper.pdf
- Young, I. (2005, May). Articulation at Swinburne University of Technology 'Intersectoral in our approach. Paper presented at the *BHERT Post Compulsory Education 'Bridging the Gap' Symposium*. Retrieved from http://scholar.google.com.au/scholar?cluster=10750794444947678737&hl=en&as_sdt=1,5
- Zepke, N., Leach, L., Prebble, T., Campbell, A., Coltman, D., Dewart, B., ...Wilson, S. (2005). *Improving tertiary student outcomes in the first year of study*. A Teaching and Learning Research Initiative Project. Wellington, New Zealand: NZCER. Retrieved from http://www.tlri.org.nz/sites/default/files/projects/9209_finalreport.pdf