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Time for Persistence

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The search for answers to the first year departure puzzle continues unabated. Despite decades of research and countless interventions the issue remains and grows increasingly complex as the contemporary first year student population becomes increasingly diverse. We propose that individuals who see education as a priority and find their studies personally relevant to their goals, are likely to negotiate substantially more time and energy for their studies, and are also more likely to engage in behaviours that promote academic success. This paper explores the relationship between student satisfaction, the role of orientation to time and approaches to learning in a first year student population that has persisted and re-enrolled in their second year of university study. The findings show associations between a future orientation and a meaningful approach to study; higher levels of satisfaction and a meaningful approach to study; and hedonism and age. Young men appear to have low perceptions of the relevance of higher education; a situation that needs further research.

Introduction

Australian Universities are being called to account on the nature of their course offerings, to account for the quality of their courses as they address increasing pressures for efficiency in a climate of decreasing government funding. One of the government indicators of institutional quality is the student retention rate i.e. the number of commencing first year students who are enrolled at the same institution the following year. The first year experience at university has been recognized as especially important, because this is when the majority of student departures occur (Tinto, 1995; Yorke, 1999) and it is key to many student experiences that led to later success in higher education (McInnis, 2001a; Pargetter et al., 1998; Tinto, 1995). The Australian first year student population is increasingly diverse, consisting of equal proportions of adolescent school-leavers and older students (McInnis, James, & Hartley, 2000). Students are also leading more complex lives. Increasing numbers of full-time students are in full or part time employment; of these many also have family and parenting responsibilities. This increase in the “number of activities and priorities that compete with the demands of university” (McInnis, 2001b, p.4) means that students are spending less time on campus. There is now a much greater need for students to make decisions as how to invest and manage their time and be responsible for their own learning and their education, in an overall complex life. This paper explores the associations between a future orientation, student satisfaction and a meaningful approach to study in a cohort first year university students at Griffith University, Queensland.

Predictors of persistence at university The reasons for withdrawal are many and varied and there is consensus that retention issues are becoming increasingly complex (McInnis et al., 2000). For some students withdrawal maybe a positive step with the learners acknowledging that they have gained what they wanted from the experience and can now follow other more appropriate paths. For others, withdrawal may be associated with failure, an inability to cope with the demands of academic life, and may be associated with lower self-confidence and lower self-esteem. Horstmanshof and Zimitat (2003a) proposed that students are also continually evaluating the costs and benefits associated with the demands made on their time and energy by their competing roles, investing in those roles that are relatively more

rewarding and disinvesting in those that are perceived as relatively more costly. These competing roles, or selves, encompass not only those resident in present time, such as student, worker, partner, parent, child, sibling and friend, but also the possible selves, the hoped-for and feared selves that reside in the future (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Furthermore, these possible selves have been found to exercise a motivational role on achievement, to the degree that an individual is able to remain focused on that desired possible self. However, such adult-identity shaping involves having a sense of the future for which one is aiming.

Future Time Perspective and Relevance to Goal of Present Time Task The ability to contemplate the future involves positioning plans, projects and motivational goals and organizing present behaviour towards those future goals (Simons, Lens, Dewitte, & Vansteenkiste, 2004). Individuals who have longer future time perspectives see their present behaviour as more important in achieving a range of both immediate and future goals, than those without or with shorter future time perspectives. Furthermore, the length of future time perspective is positively associated with the perceived usefulness and importance of the task at hand (McInerney, 2004). It can thus be seen that when the longer term goal, in this case education, is regarded as an important investment in terms of time and effort, and when the task at hand is deemed to be relevant to achieving that goal, students are more likely to persist in higher education (Frymier & Shulman, 1995; Sanbonmatsu, Shavitt, & Sherman, 1991). Peterson and Delmas (2001) reported that students who believed that higher education would provide employment opportunities and better careers were more likely to persist with their studies. Perceptions of the personal relevance of the course work were associated with stated motivations to study (Frymier & Shulman, 1995).

Achievement motivation, persistence and satisfaction Students have to manage the many priorities in their lives. As Horstmannshof and Zimitat (2003b) suggest, they regularly weigh up the costs and benefits of particular activities and if they are satisfied with the outcome, they will invest time and energy by tackling the relevant task instead of spending the time and energy on an alternative activity. This perception that effort will lead to success increases the likelihood that strategies will be employed to enhance the chances of future success (Bembenutty & Karabenick, 2004; Diener & Dweck, 1978; VanZile-Tamsen, 2001). Simons et al (2004) infer a link between future time perspective (FTP) and deep and surface approaches to study. Future perspective provides a motive for study. Student approaches to study are seen as a combination of both motive and strategy (Biggs, Kember, & Leung, 2001) revealing the affective and cognitive constructs of the behaviour. Importantly, the issue of student learning is a context dependent one, influenced by factors such as students' values and motives, perceptions of the demand of the task, and the learning environment (Biggs et al., 2001). Approaches to learning are therefore seen as a total system in which an educational event is located. It is a dynamic interactive system involving the interplay between student psychological factors, approaches to learning and learning outcomes (Biggs et al., 2001, p.135). Student learning strategies reflect both the student's motivation and intentions and as such are influenced by the student's orientation to the future.

Satisfaction with university has received much attention and has been seen as an important education outcome of itself (Lee, Jolly, Kench, & Gelonesi, 2000). It has been argued that it is related to student performance (Bean & Bradley, 1986; Pike, 1991) and is considered to be a predictor of persistence in higher education (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1977; Tinto, 1993). Donohue and Wong (1997) found significant correlations between various dimensions of university satisfaction and achievement motivation. However, not only are the determinants of satisfaction multifactorial, they are likely to vary from person to person and from institution to institution (Lee et al., 2000) and are likely to vary over time. Nevertheless, satisfaction with the university experience in terms of overall enjoyment, benefit or value may

influence the decision to persist with or leave higher education. As the intention to leave or stay is the strongest predictor of persistence in higher education (Bean and Bradley 1986), understanding the factors that impact on student satisfaction at a local level is vital to any investigation into persistence in the first year experience at university.

The aim of this paper is to explore the relationship between student satisfaction, the role of orientation to time and approaches to learning in a first year student population that has persisted and re-enrolled in their second year of university study.

Method

Participants The participants in this study were first year students from Griffith University who responded to two on-line questionnaires in second semester 2003 entitled “The Survey of the First Year @ GU” and “Student Perspectives of the Future”. The first survey was part of a university wide first-year experience initiative; the second survey was part of a PhD project. In both cases, participation was open to all commencing students in the target group, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, prior learning. Permission to conduct both surveys was granted by the Griffith Human Research Ethics Committee.

Measures Although the survey was broad in scope, the relevant questions are detailed hereafter.

Concept Measured	Sample question	Items	Scale used	Internal Reliability
Persistence	Question about frequency of thoughts of leaving	2	Multiple choice	N/A
	Question about option students hope to follow next year		Multiple choice	N/A
	Re-enrolment	1	Admin record	N/A
Students Satisfaction McInnis & al (2000)	Overall, I am really enjoying my studies at Griffith	3	5 point Likert scale	0.85
Study Process Questionnaire (SPQ) (Fox, McManus, & Winder, 2001)	I see getting high marks as a kind of competitive game, and I play to win.	18 items,	5 point Likert scale	0.625 for reproducing factor; 0.80 for meaning factor
Life Priorities	Identify in order the three most important priorities in your life at this time		Open Text	N/A
Orientation to Time (ZTPI) (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999)	I often follow my heart more than my head. I take risks to put excitement in my life.	56 items	5 point Likert scale	Future – 0.80 Past Neg 0.84 Past Pos – 0.80 Present Hedonistic 0.77 Present Fatalistic

				0.74
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Procedure An invitation to participate in an university wide survey was sent by email to all 6000 first year students enrolled at Griffith University, Queensland, Australia. The 2100 students who responded were invited, again by email, to participate in a second survey entitled “Student Perspectives of the Future”. Both surveys were on-line surveys, created and supported by “SurveyMaker” which is an application service provider affiliated with the Griffith Institute of Higher Education, Australia.

Results

A total of 430 responses to this survey were received but only cases where more than 90% of data points were available were included in this study. Missing data points were substituted with mean values during analysis (SPSS, version 12). Statistical significance was considered at $p < 0.05$. Only significant correlations greater than or equal to 0.30 were considered (Cohen, 1977) important for discussion. Acceptable data were obtained from 358 participants (Table 1) the majority of whom were females ($n=236$, 66%) and aged under 20 years ($n=208$, 58%).

Table 1. Demographics

Age Group	Total	Females	Males
19 and under	208	63 %	49 %
20-24	78	19 %	26 %
25+	72	18 %	25 %
Total	358	100%	100%

Persistence Approximately 25% of the 358 respondents indicated serious thoughts of leaving study throughout the semester. There was a significant correlation (Pearson’s correlation, $r=0.311$, $p < 0.05$) between thoughts of leaving study and satisfaction with their university experience.

Satisfaction Overall the majority of students reported high levels of intellectual stimulation, enjoyment and satisfaction from their university experience in first year (Table 3). Significant age group differences on mean scores were found on satisfaction, such that the 30+ age group were likely to be more satisfied with their university experience than either the 19 year olds or the 20 to 24 year olds, $F(3, 354) = 3.532$, $p < 0.05$. There were no significant gender differences on means for Satisfaction.

Table 2. Satisfaction with university experience ($n=358$)

	Strongly Disagree & Disagree	Neutral	Agree + Strongly Agree
I am finding my course intellectually stimulating	8%	14%	78%
Overall, I am really enjoying my course	11%	20%	69%
Overall I am very satisfied with my university experience so far	13%	22%	75%

Approaches to study Measures for reproducing and meaningful approaches to study were computed. The results show that some students used neither approach, showing a low score on both of the measures. Almost half the students (48%) used a mixture of the approaches to a moderate degree, while 44% of participants used high levels of both approaches. In this sample only a small percentage were clearly surface learners (2.4%)(i.e. high reproduction scores with low meaning score) or deep learners (1.4%)(i.e. high meaning scores with low reproduction scores). Significant gender differences on mean scores were found on the measure of Meaning (Deep Approaches to Study) $F(1, 357)=11.889, p<0.05$ showing that female students were more likely to employ approaches that search for meaning in study than male students. Significant gender differences on mean scores were also found on the measure of Reproduction strategy, $F(1, 357)=7.315, p<0.05$, such that female students were also more likely to employ reproduction approaches to study than male students. Significant moderate correlations were found between meaning approaches to study and an Orientation to the future (Pearson's correlation, $r = 0.422$) and Satisfaction (Pearson's correlation, $r = 0.356$).

Table 3. Approaches to Study (n=358)

	High Meaning Score	Medium Meaning Score	Low Meaning score
High Reproduction Score	44%		2.4%
Medium Reproduction Score		48%	
Low Reproduction Score	1.4%		2.2%

Life Priorities Life-priorities were coded on the basis of Reddy's (1998) work. The most frequently stated priorities in the lives of participating students were education (32%), relationships (15%), work (15%) and family (13%). Education (complete my degree, university study, study) was reported as the first priority in life by 54% students, the second priority by 24% students and the third priority by 11% students. Relationships, family and work were reported as first priority by 15%, 5% and 3% of participants respectively.

Time Perception In terms of orientation to time, mean scores on Present Hedonistic were significantly higher for males than females $F(1, 320) = 5.360, p<0.05$, while mean score on Past Positive were significantly higher for females than males, $F(1, 320) = 5.967, p<0.05$. Individuals in the 30+ age bracket had lower mean scores on Present Hedonistic than either the 19 year olds or the 20 to 24 year olds $F(1,318) = 6.578. p<0.05$.

Pearson's Product-Moment correlations were calculated to investigate the relationships among the variables. These are reported in Table 4. Hierarchical multiple regression analysis showed that taken together, age, gender, Present Fatalistic, Future, a meaning strategy and a reproduction strategy explained 32% of the variance in satisfaction $F(6,315) = 24.144, p<0.05$.

Table 4.

Intercorrelations among all dependent and independent variables, N = 358

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1.Past Negative	--	-.089	.086	.388**	-.045	-.184**	.052	.134*	.070	-.075	-.092	-.142
2. Past Positive	--	--	.261**	.037	.254**	.107	.115*	.149**	-.135*	-.139*	.013	-.079
3. Present Hedonistic	--	--	--	.310**	.013	.075	-.070	.030	.128*	-.232**	-.286**	-.029
4. Present Fatalistic	--	--	--	--	-.062	-.299**	-.168**	.043	.053	-.149**	-.218**	-.114*
5. Future	--	--	--	--	--	.282**	.422**	.204**	-.015	.130*	.066	.081
6. Satisfaction	--	--	--	--	--	--	.356**	.069	-.105	.173**	.269	.311**
7. Meaning	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	.578**	-.180**	.224**	.218**	.129*
8. Reproduction	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	-.142**	-.132*	-.003	-.037
9. Gender	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	.101	-.180**	-.064
10. Age Group	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	.156**	.019
11. GPA	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	.211**
12 Intention	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Discussion

This investigation into the relationships among life priorities, orientations to time, satisfaction with the university experience and approaches to study delivered three interesting findings. Firstly, all the participants in this self-selected sample were persisting students, whereas only 86% of the students in the larger institutional survey involving 1759 students persisted. Further, they were future focused, with more than half of them rating education as their main priority. Education was regarded as an investment in one's future. Secondly, there were moderately strong correlations between Future Orientation and Meaning Approaches to Study, suggesting that those with a future orientation were more likely to engage in deep and achieving approaches to study. The moderately strong correlations between Meaning Approaches to Study and levels of Satisfaction indicated that students employing meaningful approaches to their studies were more likely to be satisfied with their university experience. Thirdly, older students were more satisfied with their university experience and were also less likely to have hedonistic tendencies, indicating that older students are more focused on their studies than younger students. Finally, female students were significantly less likely to exhibit hedonistic tendencies than male students, and more likely to employ deep approaches to their studies.

Implications These findings provide support for the importance of a Future Orientation in relation to student approaches to study and the resultant satisfaction with the university experience. They reinforce the conception of education as an investment in one's future. Importantly, they raise issues about the relevance that younger male students, in particular, find in their university studies. All students in this sample had re-enrolled, but this may be an important question to consider for the broader first year student population. If older students and female students are less likely to display hedonistic tendencies, are more likely to employ deep approaches to their studies and are more likely to experience satisfaction than younger male students, why is this the case? Importantly, how can this best be addressed to ensure that young male students do not miss out on the important investment in their futures that higher education provides.

Some limitations This survey was the second part of an institutional online survey. This sample may overly represent students who are more comfortable with computer technology and this is perhaps reflected in the large proportion of younger students participating in the survey. All students in this survey persisted, whereas in the larger institutional survey involving 1759 students, persistence was approximately 86%. Those who participated in this study may have a strong institutional commitment (Tinto, 1993) that would lead to persistence and re-enrolment. Alternatively, this sample of self-selected respondents may have been attracted to the idea of a survey measuring future perspectives because it resonated with them. The authors hope to extend the study to the 2004 commencing student cohort where more non-persisters may participate, thereby allowing better exploration of future time perspective and its relationship to persistence in higher education.

Conclusions

This study was an initial investigation into the associations among student satisfaction, the role of orientation to time and approaches to learning in a first year student population that has persisted and re-enrolled in their second year of university study. Students have to manage the many priorities in their lives and as we have suggested, regularly weigh up the

costs and benefits of particular activities, only investing in these activities if they are satisfied with the perceived outcome (Horstmanshof & Zimitat, 2003b). The perception that this investment will lead to desired outcomes increases the likelihood that students will employ study strategies to enhance their chances of success. When they perceive their studies as personally relevant in relation to their priorities and goals, they are more satisfied with the university experience and consequently more likely to persist.

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