Building a better understanding of the learning community of postgraduate coursework students

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Abstract: Much has been written about the learning community of undergraduate students and what universities can do to support their satisfaction, achievement and retention. More recently there has also been a developing focus on the learning community of research higher degree students. However the learning community comprised of postgraduate coursework students has received much less attention. This paper seeks to explore the characteristics of an Education faculty learning community of postgraduate coursework students with a view to developing a more supportive learning environment for these students that enhances their satisfaction, achievement and retention. Data for this paper are drawn from a survey and analysed using statistical and thematic analytical methods. The paper finds that while these students share some characteristics with other communities of learners, particularly mature-age and part-time learners, they have a particular set of needs that requires institutional understanding if outcomes for these learners are to be maximised.

Keywords: learning communities, postgraduate students, retention

Introduction

Much has been written about the learning community of undergraduate students and what universities can do to support their satisfaction, achievement and retention (e.g., McInnis, James, & Hartley, 2000; Peltier, Laden, & Matranga, 1999) to the extent that, while “many universities have implemented an impressive array of interventions to smooth first-year transition, most know little about the nature of the student experience after this period” (Kuh, 2001-2002, p. 37). However, over the last 30 years the profile of university enrolments in Australia, as elsewhere, has undergone enormous change, with growth in postgraduate education, and masters degrees by coursework in particular, outstripping proportional growth in undergraduate students (Coulthard, 2000). In 2003, coursework postgraduates constituted 22% of all university enrolments and recorded the highest 2002/2003 growth (15.5%) among all levels
of study (DEST, 2004). In contrast, Masters by coursework enrolments in Education experienced one of the lowest rates of growth by field.

Growth in the coursework postgraduate population has been accompanied by diversification, mirroring changes in the student population at large. Pascarella and Terenzini’s (1998, p.151) description of 21st century undergraduates as “students who are on campus only part-time, who commute to college, who have major work and/or family responsibilities, and whose rates of educational progress are as varied as the students themselves” could equally be describing the coursework postgraduate. Add to this profile a wide age distribution, a majority of women, a significant component of students enrolled externally, and cohorts of international students, all studying for a variety of reasons under a range of financial conditions, and it becomes clear that postgraduate coursework students cannot be regarded as an homogenous group for which all factors relating to satisfaction, achievement and persistence in study to graduation can be expected to apply equally. McGivney (1996) identifies the difficulty of assembling data on the characteristics, experiences and progress of specific cohorts of mature students given the variation between courses, institutions, modes of study, and types of students. As Pascarella and Terenzini (1998) note, “research approaches that try to isolate the influence of a few variables for all students will simply miss the point and probably provide little in the way of useful, practice- or policy-relevant evidence” (p.151). These authors suggest a “multiple policy lever” model, implementing an array of small policy initiatives directed towards a specific population, may be more effective in supporting student satisfaction, achievement and retention than reliance on a single large policy.

There is also a perception that coursework postgraduate students, having completed an undergraduate degree, are adequately equipped for further university study (Symons, 2001), while various forms of evidence reveal this is ill founded. For example Coulthard’s (2000) examination of coursework postgraduates’ satisfaction with courses, resources and services at 27 Australian universities shows that 20% of postgraduate students were dissatisfied with courses and 28% with resources and services. Brown and Esson (1999) are particularly critical of the inadequate weight afforded postgraduate student input in review and evaluation of program quality, arguing that the experience and professional status of many postgraduates justifies a greater role. Recognition of the differing circumstances for postgraduate research students has produced studies (e.g., DETYA, 2001; Symons, 2001) that show that while some circumstances are applicable to all postgraduate coursework students (such as age, returning to study after breaks, part-time study, competing demands of family and work, relationships with academic staff, and adjustment of international students) there are many idiosyncratic circumstances that require nuanced understandings. While there is clearly a range of variables influencing the satisfaction, achievement and retention of different kinds of students, it must also be acknowledged that the combinations of particular variables and the forces they exert on decision-making will depend on the circumstances of individuals.

This paper explores the characteristics and levels of satisfaction of an Education faculty learning community of postgraduate coursework students with a view to implementing a multiple policy lever model (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998) of interventions, to provide a more supportive learning environment that enhances the satisfaction, achievement and retention of this community.

Context
This paper reports on one aspect of an ongoing project within a Faculty of Education to build stronger learning communities that support student satisfaction, achievement and retention. Other aspects of the project have been reported elsewhere, namely: student readiness for university (Watson, Johnson, & Billett, 2002); relatedness to field of study (Watson, Johnson, & Austin, 2004); and the gap between university affordances and student uptake of them (Watson & Johnson, 2003). The analytic approach taken in these papers could be described as “macro” in that general characteristics of the student
population were examined through a variety of techniques including statistical analysis, content analysis, and identification of categories of behaviour. Further papers relating to this project apply “micro” analytical techniques to explore the production of first-year identity (Johnson & Watson, 2004), and the formation and functionality of study groups (Watson & Johnson, 2004).

The data in this paper are drawn from a survey of postgraduate coursework students in a Faculty of Education in a university that aligns with McInnis and James’s (1995) “suburban university” institutional type. The survey consisted of three sections. The first section was intended to obtain demographic data such as gender, age, family, work, reasons for taking up postgraduate study, enrolment status, time since last studied, and participation in orientation activities. The second section was a series of Likert scale (5-point) questions concerned with student satisfaction with various aspects of their study. The final section involved open-ended questions providing opportunity for participants to comment on their management of their study in conjunction with their other commitments, the ways the university could support the participants’ study, and any additional comments the participants would like to add. The content of the survey was drawn from preliminary interviews with a representative group of students. The survey was mailed to all postgraduate Graduate Certificate and Masters coursework students (N=473) of the faculty with a pre-paid self-addressed return envelope. The return rate was 29.4% (N=139).

The cohort was 84.3% female, mean age was 39.24 years (50.8% were 40+ years), 54.5% had dependent children (mean number of children 2.07), 50% were employed full-time, and 20.1% had not studied for at least 10 years. The most frequently given reason for doing postgraduate study was to enhance professional qualifications, followed by job opportunities, interest, and academic stimulation. With respect to enrolment, 81.2% were enrolled part-time and 53.4% were enrolled in external mode.

Analysis

The following discussion analyses the survey and open-ended data under four general themes—information and communication, courses and teaching, assessment, and personal. Graphical data are analysed by enrolment status (full-time/part-time) and study area (Education General, Linguistics/TESOL, Special Education, Adult and Vocational Education, and Masters of Teaching International). Open response data are interpreted from a discourse analysis perspective (Fairclough, 1995). In examining the students’ written responses to the open-ended survey questions, we explore the linguistic and rhetorical language to gain a supportable explanation of the characteristics and levels of satisfaction of an education learning community of postgraduate coursework students. The overall purpose of the discourse analysis is to show how this cohort of postgraduate students is socialised into (not) becoming a community of learners, of the type characterised by the socio-cultural view of learning espoused by Renshaw (2002).

Information and communication

The participants expressed strong (mean 3.50-3.99) levels of satisfaction (Table 1) with the accuracy of information about their course, the timeliness of receipt of materials, the communication of course expectations and assessment requirements, and the availability of staff for consultation. They were less satisfied (mean <3.50) with the opportunities to develop relationships with other postgraduates, or their understanding of the services available from the university. Not surprisingly, satisfaction with information and communication was higher where the participant had taken part in an orientation activity, either online or on-campus. While 76% of participants indicated that they had an awareness of orientation activities, only 35% participated; of these however almost all were satisfied with their experience.
Even though the satisfaction with information and communication as expressed in the overall means were quite high, individual students took advantage of the open-ended section of the survey to comment on aspects of this theme that impacted adversely on them. For example the following student, while achieving well, constructs a repeated image of deficiency and isolation from academic services and peers through the use of words and phrases such as “I feel very isolated”; “didn't have enough access to advice”; “more telephone and email contact with the convenor was needed”:
Being external, I feel very isolated from my course convenor and fellow students. I didn’t have enough access to advice and direction about my course and often just had to guess if I was on the right track. More telephone and email contact with convenor was needed. Nevertheless, I received a distinction for the first course on my masters.

The student’s words imply that the reality ran counter to expectations about university study.

A breakdown of the data on information and communication by enrolment status and area of study (Figure 1) shows that in general, full-time students were less satisfied with information and communication than part-time students and that Master of Teaching International participants and Linguistics/TESOL (who also comprised mostly international students) were less satisfied. It should be noted however that relatively small numbers in these study areas might have skewed these results.

Courses and teaching

The participants expressed very strong (mean >3.99) levels of satisfaction (Table 2) with academic standards applied in their course and the quality of course materials, and strong (mean 3.50-3.99) levels of satisfaction with course content, the quality of course delivery, and the quality and availability of resources. Participants enrolled in external mode expressed stronger satisfaction with course content, the quality of delivery and the quality of course materials and less satisfaction with the other aspects of courses and teaching.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>Means (5-pt scale)</th>
<th>Means for External enrolment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The course content has met my expectations.</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>4.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am satisfied with the quality of course delivery.</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>3.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am satisfied with the quality of course materials.</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>4.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am satisfied with the quality and availability of resources for my course.</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>3.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am satisfied with the academic standards applied in my course.</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>4.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think student evaluations of courses are valuable.</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>4.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Means for questions concerned with courses and teaching, in total and for participants enrolled in external mode

While the university would be justified in taking pride in these results, individual students had very different experiences as expressed in the following two oppositional responses in the open-ended section of the survey:

* I enjoyed the studies as they again opened and extended my professional horizon and nourished me in spirit and mind (I live in rural area)! I have nothing but praise for my lecturers and their patience: they would respond to queries as soon as possible; this includes all administrative staff of library and office for external studies. Congratulations.

* I am (hopefully) in the last semester of my degree and feel it must be said that I have had some very ordinary lecturers and one extremely unreliable, disorganised one. [The academic] failed to turn up to a tutorial, never replied to emails or phone calls, and made no apology for not turning up to a tutorial.... If I had the subject I’ve got this semester first up I would have quit my degree- no question. Knowing it’s the last one is all that’s keeping me going.
The contrasting language of these responses develops the earlier theme of the importance of ready access to the university’s academic resources, particularly academic staff.

A breakdown of the data on courses and teaching by enrolment status and area of study (Figure 2) shows that generally, part-time enrolled participants are more satisfied than full-time participants, and that participants from the areas of study with the highest number of international students are less satisfied with most aspects of courses and teaching.

### The course content met my expectations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>Mean (5-pt scale)</th>
<th>Means for Full-time Employment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am satisfied with the methods of assessment used in my course.</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>4.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am satisfied with the timing of assessment in my course.</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>4.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback provided to me on assessment has been timely.</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>3.66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Assessment

The participants expressed very strong (mean>3.99) levels of satisfaction (Table 3) with methods of assessment and timing of assessment, and strong (mean 3.50-3.99) levels of satisfaction with feedback provided on assessment. Participants in full-time employment were generally more satisfied with the methods and timing of assessment than others.
Despite this general satisfaction with assessment, many participants who availed themselves of the opportunity for comment enabled by the open-ended section of the survey made comments that assessment could be planned and organised to better fit in with students’ busy lifestyles. For example:

*It may be easier to do smaller, more frequent assessments - though don’t know whether it will meet learning objectives the same. Would be helpful to have a more explicit idea of course requirements - perhaps with an example / model. Also would be helpful to have key relevant journal articles / books in closed reserve, so everyone has access to them - not just those who “get in first”.*

*Flexible study and assignment deadlines. I am a full time administrator at a large urban primary school. The role is quite demanding, exhausting and challenging therefore the extension of deadlines for writing assignments, into the holidays would be wonderful. The reading, research and data gathering is manageable but I need ‘time out’ to write!!*

A breakdown of the survey data on questions relating to assessment by enrolment status and area of study (Figure 2) shows that part-time enrolled participants were more satisfied than full-time enrolled; adult and vocational area of study participants were more satisfied with methods and timing of assessment than participants from other areas of study; and participants from general education (i.e., students undertaking a general Masters or Graduate Certificate of Education) were more satisfied with feedback than participants from the other areas of study.

![Figure 3. Satisfaction with assessment, by enrolment status and study area](image)

### Personal

Satisfaction with personal aspects of postgraduate study was mixed. Very strong (mean>3.99) levels of satisfaction were expressed for support by family and friends, and flexibility in the University response to personal needs; strong (mean 3.50-3.99) levels of satisfaction were expressed for expectation of time requirement, and employer and colleague support; lower levels of satisfaction (mean <3.50) were expressed for financial arrangements and having enough time. Female participants expressed more satisfaction with support from employers and colleagues but less satisfaction with most other personal aspects, particularly having enough time (mean 2.68 cf. 3.24 for males).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>Means Total</th>
<th>Means for Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My employer and work colleagues are supportive of my studies.</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>3.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My family and friends support my studies.</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>4.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have found the University to be flexible in response to my needs.</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>4.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My expectation of the time required for postgraduate studies was realistic.</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td>3.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have enough time for paid work, family and social or sporting activities and postgraduate studies.</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>2.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My financial arrangements make it easy for me to study.</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>3.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Means for questions concerned with personal, in total and for female participants

The open-ended section of the survey elicited a plethora of responses concerned with personal aspects of postgraduate study. Many responses are concerned with time constraints and the resultant negative impact on family and personal life, once again highlighting the image of the isolation during postgraduate study, for example:

Decreases family time especially when assessment is due. Social activities decreases when assessment is due. Personal strain when assessment is due between partner and myself.

Family: was done at the cost of family life - almost non-existent. Employment: so far no benefit to employment, however very beneficial to developing and administering new strategies in job/service delivery to students, parents, staff. Social activities and personal relationships: could not be maintained at all at former level - isolation as result.

A breakdown of the data on personal aspects shows stronger satisfaction for Master of Teaching International participants with financial arrangements, time expectations, and having enough time. Part-time enrolled participants generally perceived stronger support from employers and colleagues and family and friends than those enrolled full-time, while full-time enrolled participants expressed stronger satisfaction with having enough time than did part-time enrolled.

Possible micro policy initiatives

While it is important to acknowledge individual differences, it is nevertheless possible to identify micro policy initiatives (such as those listed below) that could provide better support for the learning community of postgraduate coursework students, if implemented in the localised environment:

Information and communication

- Promote better understanding of available university services
- Encourage wider participation in Orientation activities
- Provide enhanced opportunities to develop relationships with other postgraduates

Courses and teaching

- Further research to explore lesser satisfaction with courses and teaching for full-time students and areas of study with the highest number of international students
Assessment

- Improve timeliness of feedback on assessment items
- Identify specific methods and timing of assessment in areas of study with greater satisfaction and explore application to areas with lesser satisfaction

Personal

- Develop greater flexibility of course delivery and assessment requirements to accommodate better the competing demands on postgraduate student time
- Work with employers of postgraduate students to build a more supportive working environment

Concluding comments

While much has been said in recent times about the learning community of undergraduate students, the learning community of coursework postgraduate students is less well understood. The research that underpins the data in this paper is intended to build a better understanding of such a community within a Faculty of Education. One way of understanding the findings discussed above is to align them with Gee’s fourfold notion of identity. Gee (2000/1) describes four ways that persons can identify and be identified through reference to their talk and actions. These four ways are through reference to their:

- Natural state or N-Identity (e.g., stage of life, place in the family, state of health);
- Institutional affiliations or I-Identity (e.g., academic, student, clergy, lawyer);
- Discursive manner of talking and interacting with other people or D-Identity (e.g., friendly, reserved);
• Affinity with members of a group with shared interests and practices or A-Identity (e.g., car enthusiasts, gardeners, quilters).

Two of these identities are particularly pertinent to our findings. At present it appears that for some of this cohort the possibilities of forming a viable affinity group are being thwarted by a perceived sense of isolation from staff and peers (electronically or in person) and difficulties with finding a satisfactory fit between academic demands and those of family, professional and personal life. Although institutional affiliations are generally reported as good, especially the quality of staff, and assessment, a key problem in forming an affinity group or successful learning community is the lack of opportunity for many postgraduate students to talk and interact with like-minded people.

Analysis of data in this paper has explored themes of information and communication, courses and teaching, assessment, and personal to inform small policy initiatives that would enhance satisfaction, achievement and retention for this community. Data were analysed by full/part-time enrolment and by study area for each theme. The diversity in findings for different groups of students endorses the need for a multiple policy level model (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998) of initiatives. However, as data from open-ended questions in the survey showed, even within groups, individual students experienced various themes in quite different ways.

References


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