Transition and retention in human services:  
An exploratory study of the first year

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on an exploratory study which examined a sample of Australian human service students’ perceptions of adjustment and retention during the first year. This study concerned itself with ascertaining whether there were any discipline-specific impacts on retention for this group. From analysis of the results, it was found that human service students experienced the same types of impacts on retention as research in other fields has reported. Particularly, the juggling of multiple responsibilities could impact adversely on retention and completion. The findings add further support to offering a range of strategies to boost first year retention.

Keywords:  Retention, First year experience, Human services students

INTRODUCTION

The matter of student retention and completion is an issue which is concerning many universities and institutes of higher learning both nationally and internationally. It is an issue not only because of the difficulties it presents for the university from an administrative perspective including loss of funds, resourcing implications and reputation but also for the effect on the students involved. This paper reports on an exploratory study of Human Services students’ perceptions of adjustment to first year university study. This is innovative because very little research has been conducted on adjustment and retention within this discipline area.

The Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA, 2001) defined retention as those students who are enrolled in one year and who are enrolled in the subsequent year. Attrition on the other hand applies to those students who enrolled in one but who are not
enrolled in the subsequent year (DETYA, 2001). Retention and attrition are not new issues, for example in 2000 DETYA reported that of all students commencing University in Australia approximately one third would not complete their program and nearly half of these students would not complete their first year (DETYA, 2001). For a significant number of other students, the first year experience at University continues to impact on their capacity to complete subsequent years and ultimately graduate from their program.

There have been many studies which have identified the key factors of the first year experience which influence a student’s decision to continue with their studies. Akerlind and Jenkins (1998) describe the first year student experience in terms of students’ expectations and satisfaction. Krause, Hartley, James and McInnis (2005) suggest that first year students historically have perceived university study as being a learning environment that creates valuable opportunities to further their career goals. Zemsky and Oedel (1983) also state that students enter university with a set of expectations of what they believe the experience will be like. Tinto (1993) described these expectations as the tool by which students assess and measure their experiences. These expectations can be categorised as transition and social and academic engagement. Transition is a process of not only leaving past associations and behaviours behind and developing new ones but also of developing an identity which matches their expectations (Nora, 2002).

Social and academic engagement has been described as the process whereby students gain a sense of belonging to the institution and of being satisfied with the provision of quality education (Elliott, 2003). Tucker (1999) argued that transition was a combination of both these aspects and that in order to progress to successful completion of their studies there were nine components, namely: vision, sense of community, students’ preparation and preparedness, institutions’ preparation, support from parents, the role of the student, desire for change, community college stigma, and commuting distance from school. Further from a retention perspective, vision and sense of community appeared to be key factors (Tucker, 1999 p 164). Students reported that a sense of community resulted from engagement not only with their peers but also with academic staff who were there to assist them in their journey. This engagement could occur in relation to course content, gaining academic research and writing skills or in general discussion about the university experience.
Beekhoven, DeJong and Van Hout (2003) reported that as well as engagement with the academic content of courses and programs, individual student characteristics are important indicators of progress and completion. For example in classes with a higher proportion of female students, Beekhoven et al. found that completion rates were higher for the women than for the male student. Female students were often more committed and had realistic expectations of the level of work required. Hayden and Long (2006) found that not only was there a difference in the completion rates for males and females but a difference in the types of courses chosen. 65% of female students were more likely to choose to study in areas which supported part-time study such as the Humanities and Social Sciences than courses such as Law and Engineering which tended to discourage part-time study. Similarly, Krause, Hartley, James, McInnes (2005) found that there was an over-representation of female students in the traditional areas of teaching, nursing, and human services.

Beekhoven et al. (2003) also identified that students considered the financial costs and implications of their programs before enrolling. Student characteristics such as being in full time work, limited financial resources and family caring responsibilities were also implicated in the completion of higher education programs (Hawley & Harris, 2005). Low-socio economic status, disability, non-English speaking background and first-generation university students have also been factors recognised through research affecting retention and attrition (James et al. 2004; Kift, 2006).

Further to the impact of individual characteristics on completion of higher degree study, students choosing careers in human services are more likely to have a history of mental health issues, addictive behaviours, child abuse and family violence in their family of origin. In comparison to students in business programs social work students reported that their experience of addictive and compulsive behaviours within their family had influenced their decision to pursue a social work career (Marsh, 1998). Black, Jeffreys & Hartley (1993) reported that traumatic life experiences, including family abuse was a significant factor in the program and career choice of students enrolling in social work programs. Buchbinder (2007) suggests that rather than being a negative factor, these prior experiences could contribute to an increased commitment on behalf of the student to enhancing the well-being of individuals who may be in similar circumstances.
THE CONTEXT – CHARACTERISTICS OF HUMAN SERVICES (HSV) STUDENTS IN AN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY

The study was undertaken with students enrolled in a human services program offered by a human services school in a large, multi-campus Australian university. In line with previous studies, Beekhoven et al. (2003), Hayden & Long (2006) and Krause et al (2005), 92% of HSV students were females compared with a University wide figure of 70%. Twelve percent identified as having a disability compared to five per cent across the University. Thirty percent identified as being the primary carer and of those, 22 % reported caring responsibilities greater than 26 hours per week. This was double the University figure of 11%. Sixty-five percent of HSV students indicated that they were in paid employment for between 6-26 hours with ten percent of students employed for more than 26 hours per week. Interestingly 74% of all HSV students were first generation university students compared with a University wide figure of 60% (Starting@Griffith Survey Report, 2007).

The above data, together with research conducted by Fowler and Branch in 2001, indicated the need to consider ways of supporting first year students in this particular human services school. Fowler and Branch (2001) identified that the first year experience for students could be improved by increased contact time between students, their peers and academic staff. Assistance with understanding the fundamentals of academic study namely writing and research skills was also identified. As a result the school developed an initiative which it called Common-Time.

The Common-Time Program was designed to enable first year students and academic staff to come together in an environment which is conducive to learning and discussion and addresses both the social and academic needs of students. The central learning objective of the program was student development in the areas of academic, interpersonal and communication skills.

The program was first conducted in 2000 and evaluated in 2001. This evaluation found that the Common-Time Program contributed positively to the experiences of the students in terms of student engagement (Fowler & Zimmat, 2004) and indeed influenced students’ feelings of belonging and integration into university life (Clark, 1998). However this evaluation did not provide insight into whether the involvement of a student in the Common-Time Program
would influence his/her decision to remain in the human services program. The 2001 evaluation also indicated that the Common-Time Program required a strong time and resource commitment from students, university staff and the wider University. However, despite having this opportunity to develop enhanced academic and professional development skills it was unclear what impact this would have on retention. This project aimed to address this void by examining students’ perceptions of Common-Time in terms of adjustment and retention during their first year of human services study.

The program has been scheduled for two hours per week which is for both first year students and first year course convenors. Additional university staff such as course tutors, learning assistance and library support staff are also involved. The format of the session allows for both formal and informal activities. The focus of the formal session is to enhance the development of the students’ academic skills for example critical thinking, academic writing and researching. The informal session provides students with the opportunity to engage with staff and fellow students in a relaxed and safe environment which is conducive to sharing their views, experiences and concerns.

**METHODOLOGY**

To investigate students’ perceptions of the Common-Time Program (CT) and retention issues, a three-stage data collection strategy was employed utilising self-administered questionnaires. Three slightly different questionnaires were used. This was necessary in order to capture changes to students’ attitudes and adjustment throughout the year. As there were no known existing instruments available, the questions were designed to respond to the research aims and also to capture participants’ unanticipated views on the topic.

**Sample**

All students (n=244) enrolled in CT at an Australian human services school in 2005 were asked to participate in the survey. Thirty-one first-year students initially agreed to participate. Numbers throughout the data collection period are presented in Table One. All participants were female (no males responded) and aged between 17 and 56 years of age (27%: 26-33 years; 27%: 41-48 years).
Table One: Response rates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Number</th>
<th>Survey One No.</th>
<th>Survey Two No.</th>
<th>Survey Three No.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant numbers</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Participants’ reasons for withdrawal or non-participation were: no longer interested, leave of absence, unable to find time, no response to request).

**Procedure**

The researchers presented the aims of the study to all students enrolled in the CT program at the commencement of the 2005 university year. The researchers explained that the study was investigating retention and the CT program. The requirements of the study were also detailed. Students were advised that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time during the data collection period. They were advised that their responses would be confidential and that all data collected would be de-identified. Students who indicated a willingness to participate during this session were provided with an Information and Consent package and asked to complete the Stage One questionnaire. These students were subsequently contacted throughout the year and asked to complete Stage Two and Stage Three questionnaires.

**Stage One**

The purpose of the first questionnaire was to explore students’ perceptions of: (1) what would help them successfully complete a university degree; (2) their existing knowledge of topics that were to be covered in the CT program; and (3) their current knowledge needs in order to transition successfully to university life. The questionnaire consisted of 22 open-ended questions, 16 Likert scales and five closed-ended questions. This questionnaire was administered in Week Four of the university year so early experiences and perceptions about university life and CT were obtained from the participants. This questionnaire took approximately 30 minutes to complete.

**Stages Two and Three**

The purpose of the Stage Two and Three questionnaires was to further explore participants’ experience and learning from the CT program and again to collect information about possible issues affecting retention. The Stage Two questionnaire consisted of nine open-ended questions, four Likert scales and one closed-ended question. The Stage Three questionnaire consisted of 17 open-ended questions, four Likert scales and one closed-ended question. Stage Two
questionnaires were administered at the end of Semester One, 2005 with Stage Three questionnaire administered at the end of Semester Two, 2005. Each questionnaire took approximately 30 minutes to complete.

Data analysis
Qualitative thematic data analysis was undertaken on participants’ responses within the questionnaires (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Specifically, focus was given to all questions within the surveys that pertained to adjustment and retention. The data presented in this paper is based on the analysis of these open-ended questions which yielded qualitative data. The two researchers developed a number of codes based on the analysis of words, sentences and phrases offered by the participants. In most instances, there was a high level of agreement between the researchers on the codes assigned. In the instances where codes differed, the researchers discussed this until a level of agreement could be reached.

RESULTS
This paper focuses on HSV students’ perceptions of retention and adjustment to university life based on three stages of data collection. This covers their views on adjusting to university life and what could impact on their decision not to complete. In presenting this analysis, we give most detail to Stage One data and then compare this to data collected in Stages Two and Three in order to show commonalities and differences.

Stage One
Analysis of Stage One data produced a number of insights into what could assist students to successfully transition into university life and complete a degree program. These factors were either internal or external to the individual student. Like other research we found these to be related to staff, student and interactional factors (Beekhoven, DeJong and Van Hout 2003; Hawley and Harris, 2005; Tucker, 1999).

Factors external to the individual student
External factors refer to those issues/characteristics and/or circumstances which are institutionally orientated and can impact on students’ adjustment and retention. Table Two lists all themes in relation to external characteristics identified from the analysis.
Table Two: External factors related to transition and completion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University policies and procedures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching and learning strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities for peer support</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**University policies, procedures and resources**

Participants identified that there were a number of university policies and procedures which could impact on their capacity to make a successful transition to University study and to complete their degree. This encompassed the logistics of operating within a university context, such as parking, where to submit assignments and transport. But also broader issues such as program change and accessing support were identified.

The issue of resources needed by students to transition and complete their degree program was identified by a number of the participants. Resources in this case appeared to mean anything from the availability of books and journals in the library to access to learning support services for assistance with understanding academic requirements. The following comments illustrated this point:

*How to use the library facilities*

*More people on hand to check and guide you through assessment items.*

**Teaching and learning strategies**

This theme was mentioned by many of the participants as being vital to their capacity to transition to university and complete their degree program. This theme included strategies such as group work, the use of the Blackboard format (i.e. IT platform) as a teaching tool, the lectures being well organised and interesting. These strategies are illustrated in the following quotes from participants:

*Motivational speakers. Struggle with the “get up and go” element. So seminars should be brilliant!! Just to remind us why we’re here and get us positive again*
More explanation and feedback about assessment. Less reading so I can keep up

Earlier posting of lecture notes – some courses. Tutors allowed to discuss assessments with students in some courses

Technology

Given the demographics of this particular study, it is not surprising that the theme of technology was a significant external factor in an individual’s perception of their capacity to transition and adjust to University life. A number of participants reported that they had very basic computer skills prior to commencing university study. Others, because of their prior work roles, were able to navigate the computer interface quite successfully. This diversity is illustrated in the following comments:

I was basic computer illiterate. I have been on a steep learning curve, but it is surprising how quickly you pick things up

Excellent skills as I have used computers for work as a personal assistant… for the last 12 years

Opportunities for peer support

Participants in this study reported that peer support was a factor in their capacity to transition to university and complete their degree program. Peer support appeared to be important in the management of stress and to assist with understanding the assessment tasks. The following comments were offered by the participants in the study:

More one on one assistance especially with staff or previous students who have done the course eg mentoring program

I am currently seeking help with student counsellors. I talk a lot, and battle through. Try to put support network in place, mother student mentor

Grasping the university styles of requirements of essay writing. Socialising with other students and forming that support network
Besides external factors, participants were also influenced by a number of interactional factors between staff and students. In order to understand these interactions, it is necessary to explore the staff characteristics identified by the participants as having an impact on adjustment and retention. The following table lists the main themes in relation to staff characteristics.

**Table Three: Staff characteristics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use of university resources and technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching and learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal attributes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Use of university resources and technology*

Participants in the study identified that staff characteristics could have an impact on their capacity to transition to university and complete their degree program. It was important to participants that staff had utilised the relevant technology in a timely manner.

*That lecturers are consistent with blackboard in terms of content updates and guidelines*

*Lecturers had organised websites and notes ready in timely fashion.*

*Teaching and learning*

The participants in the study reported that this staff characteristic was significant in terms of their own engagement with University life. The scheduling of tutorials, access to lecturers and tutors enhanced the participants’ experience as illustrated by the following comments:

*More tutes*

*More contact with lecturers and tutors*

*Possibly less jargon and more “common terms” until we get the hang of it*
**Personal attributes of academic staff**

The personal attributes of academic staff could also influence transition and retention. Staff needed to be well organised and motivational in their presentations. Staff also needed to be accepting of the values and beliefs of the students and to have positive regard for them. The following presents one student’s comments in this area

*My dissatisfaction so far relates to the knowledge I am being presented with, as I disagree with much of what is taught (e.g Social Science) so I would appreciate it a bit more if an accepting approach of people’s beliefs was incorporated from the lecturers themselves*

Interactions between students and staff were also seen as important in enhancing the first year experience. The following table outlines the nature and scope of those interactions recognised and valued by participants.

**Table Four: Interactions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of Interaction</th>
<th>Scope</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Support</td>
<td>more one on one interactions with: staff students previous students mentoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment – Using tutorials seminars workshops</td>
<td>expectations defining clarity content feedback trialling assignment checking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Groups</td>
<td>knowledge sharing practising application of knowledge writing and study skills</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in Table Four, these interactions were grouped into three main areas: personal support, assessment and small groups. From the students’ perspective this involved a range of strategies including one-on-one interaction, clear expectations, knowledge sharing and others.
Internal factors to the individual student

Internal factors refer to those issues/characteristics and/or circumstances which are personal in nature. This can impact on the student’s perception of how well he/she will transition/adjust to university life and successfully complete a degree program. Most of the students in this study identified personal internal factors as impacting on their adjustment. The following is a list of all the themes in relation to internal characteristics.

Table Five: Internal factors related to transition and completion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family, work and outside commitments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial issues</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time and time management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self belief</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal engagement with course material and outcomes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Family and outside commitments

In commenting that family issues could impact on transition and successful completion, participants identified the interplay and juggle of managing a university load and commitment/energy for family. Participants also identified that a loss of opportunity to participate in non-university activities could influence their ability to complete courses and the degree program.

As a mother of four children, two with learning disabilities, one who is profoundly deaf and I am the primary caregiver for my granddaughter who has a major heart condition. These are extra stresses that can affect my ability from time to time but I don’t want this to stop me from finishing.

Finding time to do everything expected by lecturers without losing my marriage in the process!

Students’ necessity to work was also regularly referred as an important outside commitment. As discussed in the next section many students needed to work in order to financially survive. The following are examples of some of the comments made by the students:
Difficult with work and a young family...

As a mature aged student, family and work commitments must be taken into account.

Added to the sense of competing demands was also for some, feelings of guilt about what their family might be missing as a result of their study commitments.

Guilt – not being able to help children more with school work or have fun time with them.

Alternatively, the impact of family and their perception was also experienced for one participant as an incentive to complete her degree. She was acutely aware of her late mother’s wishes in respect to this issue.

I struggled and may continue to struggle with emotional adjustment for a while due to my Mum dying of cancer at the end of January this year – however it was her desire for me to achieve this degree...

On the other hand, a number of participants recognised that a lack of personal support from informal sources (e.g. family) could impact on transition and retention. Specific issues detailed were: problems with family, no support close by, having no family in the local area, lack of support by family at home, husband also studying and needing support in order to ‘get through’ university study.

Financial issues

A number of the participants indicated that financial pressure could be the catalyst for ceasing university study. This related to being able to afford the basic necessities and being able to pay debts. The following indicates some of the comments in this area:

Lack of financial support would hinder my desire to complete the degree

...The finances may be the deciding factor for me if I continue or drop out of my degree.

One participant indicated that she changed her living circumstances in order to financially cope. Following are her comments:

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Probably the fact that I had to move back home to economise. If that gets too much I’d probably choose to return to work so I can get away again.

**Time and time management**

Having sufficient time to manage the requirements of university life along with other commitments featured in a number of the participants’ responses. Many were concerned about not having sufficient enough time to do the assessable work because of other competing personal, familial and work demands. As such, some of the participants recognised that they needed to employ good time management skills or develop such skills. Comments offered by the participants included the following:

> Personally I need to keep up with readings, research for assignments and assessment. Effective time management on my behalf and balance between home and studies.

> More time which is something no one can give us. My time management is good, and I am determined but there just isn’t enough hours in the day with my other commitments.

> Time management will definitely affect the marks I get, and consequently passing the course.

**Self belief**

A small number of the participants indicated that an important dimension of their likely success in transitioning and completing university study was their belief and level of confidence in themselves. This related to whether they believed they had the intellectual capacity, skills and qualities to study at university level. Comments such as the following were offered by the participants:

> My ability is my main concern...

> Smart enough – I hope I am.

Stemming from this, some participants were able to recognise the importance of personal fortitude to push through any difficulties as shown in the following comments made by participants:
Focus and determination, the rest may be difficult, however all will be OK.

...I have made a commitment to myself to successfully complete this degree.

Health

Both physical and emotional health/wellbeing was recognised by a small number of participants. In addition, the impact of stress and tension was recognised by some of the participants and that they needed to develop strategies to manage such reactions. The following comments provide examples of the insight of some of the students:

I also suffer from depression and anxiety – this influences my ability.

[My] ability to deal with stress must be improved in order for me to complete this degree, as I’m currently under a great deal of stress and can’t see it all being worthwhile in the future.

Ability to learn better ways to deal with stress. Am not willing to be stressed over assignments for the next 4.5 years – too much impact on my life and health.

Personal engagement with course material

Human service students need to develop understanding, sensitivity and appropriate responses for respectfully working with and across difference and, as such, are at times required to engage with material that might challenge their own beliefs. One participant recognised that incongruence between her own personal belief system and material encountered could lead to withdrawal from a program of study. One participant offered the following comment:

...Religious beliefs conflicts much of what is taught in Social Science, and it is discouraging for me to have to come and learn about issues I disagree with, although I do understand that I must embrace all fields of thought to be successful in the human services field.

The capacity of students to personally engage and stay interested in the material was also recognised as a factor related to transition and
retention. The material in a program needed to be perceived as relevant, meaningful and linked clearly to a discernible career outcome.

**Needs related to transition and retention**

The final question asked of students in Stage One sought their views on what they would need from the University in order to complete their degree. Besides those few students who indicated that withdrawing was not an option “I will complete”, “I am a very stubborn person and I know I will finish” many of the participants primarily suggested academic and instrumental assistance related to assignments, examinations and course content. Some also suggested instrumental assistance related to childcare, finance and university fees. Following are some of the issues students identified in response to this question.

*More access time with Learning Assistance as they are very busy – time with lecturers to discuss assignments.*

*Support essay writing. Understanding in areas that I am not confident in.*

*Reduce fees, to be able to communicate with lecturers more easily and readily, a lecture to last longer than one hour.*

*Greater financial assistance as money or cost is the only thing I see at the moment that could make me think of quitting.*

A small number of students also identified that personal support may help, however, were not specific in their responses on the nature of this assistance. Interestingly, some students related the importance of regularly revisiting why they were undertaking a human services degree. This related to staying motivated and forging a potential new future. The nature of this new future in terms of opportunity was also important for some. Two examples from the participants were:

*A reminder that I go back to being a checkout Chic at Coles if I quit before I finish.*

*Reminder of why I chose it in the first place.*
Finally, one participant suggested that personal commitment by teaching staff was important for her likely continuation.

*More genuine commitment by lecturers – to help us achieve our full potential.*

*Less... [soapbox] antics from lecturers and other students – it seems that we can only work in the industry if we believe everyone should be supported regardless of what they do. I need to know I’m going to get a job where I can by myself and also make a good living – I feel as if that’s seen as a bad thing!*

**Mid year perceptions and experiences**

The students’ responses about assistance for continuance after completing one semester of study did not substantially differ when compared to Stage One material. The factor that most students recognised as being important in their continuation was lecturer/staff characteristics. This encompassed the importance of positive teaching qualities and expectations by staff. The following are examples of the comments made:

*...Having interesting lecturers.*

*Reasonable expectations from lecturers and tutors about how much we can do in the time we have.*

*Positive speakers (motivational) to keep motivated and on task.*

This highlights the importance and impact that staff can have in harnessing and sustaining students in the educative environment. Others factors which students identified were: career program signalling, resources – tutorials, library, lecture notes, self motivation, more time and time management skills, more money, timetable – flexibility and change, assignments – type and structure.

Mid way through the year, what students suggested that could derail them from university study was primarily financial commitments or money worries. In addition, a number of students reported that disruption/conflict with their family could adversely impact on their continuation.

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End of year perceptions and experiences

Students were requested to reflect on their experience of their first year at university. A consistent theme or message which emerged in considering participants’ responses was one of enjoyment. Many reported that they had really enjoyed their first year with some highlighting that considerable personal development and growth had occurred,

Really good – never knew learning could be so much involved- it opened my mind.

Most participants also commented on how challenging their first year had been in terms of workload, difficulty with the work and adjustment to university life. The following are examples of these comments:

Good – but a little overwhelming sometimes, because of getting use to both the uni system, what is expected, juggling family to be able to meet uni needs and understanding the complexity of the human service field

Hectic, time-consuming but very self-satisfying experience

Very difficult but very rewarding

This enjoyable but challenging experience was facilitated by a number of factors. Two factors that participants identified as being important in assisting them during the first year were peer support and support via the Common-Time Program.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Thirty-one beginning female undergraduate human service students shared their views on commencing university study and what could impact on their adjustment and retention at university. Although only a small sample and therefore cannot be generalised, these students provided a number of interesting insights into managing university life. However it should be noted that given that all the participants were female, the findings may have been different if the sample were all male or a mixture of males and females. Given these limitations, the responses do highlight a number of important issues for consideration when effectively supporting beginning HSV students.

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The results show that a variety of personal and university factors can impact on adjustment to university life and retention. Students, particularly mature age female students are juggling and managing multiple demands and commitments. Many are supporting families, working or have other commitments such as caring for their children, and/or elderly parents all of which require considerable energy and time (O’Shea, 2007; Scott Burns & Cooney, 1996). They may be struggling with conflicting identities and roles such as mother, student, daughter, practitioner, employee, partner, carer, friend (Walsh, Gold, Jensen & Jedrzkiewicz, 2005, p. 992; Shanahan, 2000, p. 157). They are not able to solely dedicate themselves to the scholarship of learning. This raises important implications for supporting, retaining and effectively educating female students.

First, on a very basic level as university educators we need to recognise the nature and characteristics of our student populations. The need for all staff members to be aware of the unique pressures and issues for students is important. For instance, Akerlind & Jenkins (1998, p. 285) discuss that academic staff need to be aware of “the progress and problems of first year students”. We need to be mindful that they may be juggling multiple demands and that these factors may to a greater or lesser extent impact on their study during their degree program. Many students are time-poor and therefore teaching mechanisms that are time-effective and potentially time-flexible may need greater examination and incorporation into university programs. Others have discussed the importance of flexibility of timetables (Trotter & Roberts, 2006), but we may also need to look at offering programs with time-saving/time-flexible options such as intensive blocks, classes during non-core work hours, combining on-line and on-campus contact and utilising technology that does not necessitate classroom presence (e.g. podcasts). Trotter & Roberts (2006, p. 382-383) also offer a number of recommendations related to first year retention such as, effective pre-entry marketing and information, induction activities that aim to facilitate relationships with other students and staff, tutor support, monitoring attendance and following-up non-attendance and, active participatory teaching and learning. All these strategies appear further supported by this research.

We also would like to emphasise the importance of the personal dimension of students’ lives – as a key impact on their adjustment and transition. More specific acknowledgement and recognition of students’ personal needs in the university environment maybe required. However, this is a complex issue given the nature of some
of the HSV student population. It is not uncommon for students to be attracted to the human services field because of previous difficult lived experiences and therefore the desire to assist others. Students may be at different points of resolution and understanding of their own personal problems which can be productive and unproductive in the human service response. The importance then of orientating HSV students to personal support mechanisms and services during the first year seems essential.

This personal dimension in terms of how we support, engage and connect with students is also worth revisiting. The students in this study highlighted the importance of authentic engagement with peers and staff. These relationships were seen as influential to adjustment and therefore should not be underestimated. One strategy that could be employed is academic staff undertaking periodic checking and re-emphasising support mechanisms in place for students during their commencing semester. For example, this could encompass telephoning/emailing or sending a text message to all first year students twice during semester one (weeks two and seven) with at-risk students (those students who may be failing or not submitting work) being identified early on for more intensive support. (This idea was proposed by Dr Jane Fowler to be trialled within the School of Human Services, Griffith University). Often students do not access support until a crisis has occurred and by the time they seek support they maybe already overwhelmed. Continued importance in clarifying and revisiting the juggling act and strategies for managing this, particularly during the first year where many students may be ‘learning how to’ be a university student could be beneficial (Akerlind & Jenkins, 1998). The development of a structured program such as Common-Time is also an important initiative in this regard.

From students’ responses it is also important to discuss motivational triggers for university study. These triggers could be: presentations by outstanding educators and practitioners, reminders about why one is undertaking university study, possible outcomes/careers resulting from university study and encouragement that personal fortitude can pay off. Connecting with students in a manner which recognises their plight, aspirations and desire to positively contribute to the human services field has the potential to be a excellent catalyst for strengthening students’ motivation to successfully complete their study.

Today’s student is potentially involved with and managing multiple activities. Tertiary study is one of these demands. Although
universities cannot tailor courses to individual circumstances processes can be put in place to support and be responsive to the day-to-day plight of students. From this and other research, retention can be enhanced by: creating connectedness via relationships with fellow students and staff; developing educative arrangements that scaffold learning; and offering learning arrangements that are flexible and lifestyle sensitive.

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