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Elaboration Of The Student Self And Persistence In Higher Education

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Higher education institutions around the world have invested decades of research and employed countless interventions to address low first year retention rates, as such rates impact negatively on funding, enrolments and public perceptions. The increased diversity of the contemporary first year student population, and their competing identities of student, worker, partner, parent and friend has further complicated an already complex issue. Persistence is used in this study to understand the individual student’s efforts to seek encouragement and support to persevere in his/her studies despite the challenges that he/she may face. Social Exchange Theory is proposed as a model for understanding student decision-making behaviour regarding continuation of study. We propose that students continually evaluate the cost-benefits associated with each of their life roles, and invest in those roles that are relatively rewarding and disinvest in those that they perceive as relatively costly. We explore the notion of an elaborated student self as a means of negotiating increased time and energy for study. We also consider ways in which such elaboration may lead to positive student behaviour.

Despite decades of research and innumerable interventions, low first year university retention rates continue to impact negatively on funding, enrolments and public perception of higher education around the world (McInnis, 2001). The literature on the first year university student persistence has been strongly influenced by Tinto’s (1993) theoretical model of student departure. Tinto’s approach suggests that it is the level of integration between the student’s personal characteristics and attributes that influence commitment to course and institution, on the one hand, and the characteristics of the university, on the other hand, which determine decisions about persistence of withdrawal. Tinto’s model has been criticized for lacking specificity about integration (Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998), and empirical internal consistency (Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1977). More importantly, Ozga & Sukhnandan (1998), Yorke (1999) and Tanaka (2002) expressed concern that it is characterized by culturally specific assumptions of student characteristics and behaviour and therefore has limited application to higher education institutions outside the USA. This is further emphasized by McInnis (2001) who urges universities to examine persistence within their own context and seek local rather than generic solutions.

The Australian first year population is increasingly diverse, but from 1994-1999 there has been a constant proportion of first year students (33%) considering deferring or leaving study in first semester (McInnis & James, 1995; McInnis et al, 2000). McInnis et al (2000) reported increases in the number of full-time students in employment and in the proportion of students who find it difficult to motivate themselves to study. There have also been major changes in teaching and learning as universities move toward online learning so that students are spending less time in structured contact sessions and on campus. As a consequence, there is a much greater need for students to manage their time and be responsible for their own learning and their education, in an overall complex life.

Persistence has usually been examined from a sociological viewpoint (Braxton, 2000). Whilst psychological approaches have been used they have tended to examine persistence by comparing and contrasting stayers and leavers in terms of personal characteristics (Tinto, 1993). These research activities have often worked
from a deficit approach – there is something missing or some defect associated with non-persistence in higher education. This research study has adopted a more student-centred approach where those who voluntarily departed from higher education studies were not characterised as lacking the intellectual attributes necessary to meet academic demands (Tinto, 1993). We propose and explore a model to describe the psychological processes associated with student decisions to leave or persist with higher education.

**Defining Persistence and Retention**

Although the terms retention and persistence are often used interchangeably in the literature, and are defined and measured in terms of “re-enrolment, goal and degree-credit hour progress and degree completion” (Tinto, 1993, p.215), we believe that there are important differences between these two terms. While retention can be seen as institutional interventions made to retain the student, persistence is used to describe the individual student’s efforts to seek encouragement and support to persevere in his/her studies despite the challenges that he/she may face. This distinction is important because a student may persist in higher education despite a change of course, mode of study, campus or even institution.

**Social Exchange Theory (SET)**

We propose that Social Exchange Theory (SET) provides a model for understanding the student decision-making behaviour regarding continuation of study. The idea of having a ‘balanced life’ and finding ways of dealing successfully with competing demands to accommodate work, careers and social integration is not new (Wilensky, 1960). Contemporary students have many competing selves: student, worker, partner, parent, child, sibling and friend (McInnis et al, 2000). The theory of social exchange (SET) (Emerson 1981) whilst commonly employed to examine interpersonal relationships has been used in this study to examine intrapersonal relationships: relationships between the selves. We propose that students continually evaluate the cost/benefits associated with each of their selves, investing in those roles that are relatively rewarding and disinvesting in those that they perceive as relatively costly.

**The Competing Selves**

The idea that the “self is multiple” has developed in the psychological literature over the last century. James (1890/1950 authorised version) averred that “a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him [sic] and carry an image of him [sic] in their mind”(p.294). Each of us holds images in our minds of our various selves, and is able to access these various selves. Thus we have both Now selves and Future selves. Sometimes, we experience these selves singularly; at other times we experience ourselves more complexly, as a worker and a teammate simultaneously. At times these selves operate comfortably in tandem, at other times they may compete with each other in the moment. An example of the tension caused by competing selves could occur, when a sick child makes demands on the parent self for time and attention at the same time that the worker self is called on to meet the demands of an urgent deadline.
Likewise, we have an idea of these selves that include potential (future) selves or possible selves, both the hoped-for selves and the feared selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Some of these possible selves may be well developed and fully described and considered core, while others may be more peripheral and less developed. While some of these possible selves have a positive focus, others are imbued with negative feelings and negative connotations. It is therefore possible to consider both positive and negative possibilities for the self, or positive and negative possible or future selves (Buirs & Martin, 1997). Possible selves have been found to exercise a motivational role in achievement. However, realising a desired goal depends on an individual’s capacity to hold the desired possible self dominant in the working self-concept, that is, to remain focused on that desired possible self. An active positive self energises and organises the individual’s activities in its own pursuit (to support its own success) and effectively neutralises other competing selves by making them less accessible. Such an active positive self may be regarded as an elaborated self. Leondari, Syngollitou and Kiosseoglou (1998) found that students with elaborated positive selves (selves that are richly perceived and about which they hold mentally organized information) outperformed other students academically and showed greater persistence in tasks. How does this elaboration work? Is it a meta-cognitive strategy that some students have as part of natural ability, or is it a developmental approach that students acquire along the way?

**Approach to this study**

In this paper we explore the use of a Social Exchange Theory framework to understand the first year experience and retention. We have chosen a retrospective approach, analyzing survey data from the First Year @Griffith Survey (Zimitat, 2003) designed to answer other research questions regarding the first year experience. This survey of 1640 first year students at a multi-campus, metropolitan university in Australia sought to explore their experiences of learning technologies, teaching and learning practices and other factors that may influence their decision to defer their studies. These factors included perceptions of inclusion and belonging, academic literacy, and time spent in extra-curricular activities and other life roles.

Our retrospective approach has merit in that it provides a means of testing several factors that are important to this research, however it affords no opportunity to answer additional questions relevant to the exploration of competing selves. We have undertaken a post-hoc analysis of the experiences of full-time students with different roles reported as by Zimitat (2003) to seek (a) evidence for competing selves in the lives of students, and (b) rewarding factors that contribute to the development of an elaborated or “strong” student-self that can successfully compete and negotiate with other selves. Zimitat’s groups of students include: full-time students, students who are primary income earner in household, and full-time students who are the primary income earner and carer in their household. For simplicity, we may at times dichotomise these three groups into full-time students with and without other responsibilities.
Findings

Multiple selves
In some cases, university students in this study were spending more time in paid employment than on campus. We found that 40% of first year students at Griffith University were spending an average of 11 to 15 hr/week in academic study whilst more than 40% were spending more than 11 to 30hr/week in paid employment indicating that, for many students the time investment in the student-self approximates the time investment in the worker-self. Twenty two percent of the full time students surveyed also identified as the primary income earner for their households, with half of them (10.6%) employed fulltime (Zimitat, 2003). Of the 17% of full time students who identified as primary carer in their household, one third of them (5.5%) were also employed full-time. Despite not being able to shed light on the other selves that may exist in the lives of students e.g. sporting selves, romantic selves etc, it was clear that a large proportion of the student population (33%) had additional selves that compete for their attention and time.

The experience of university
The great majority (93%) of full-time first year students, with or without other responsibilities, reported a strong desire to do well in their university studies (Zimitat, 2003). Yet nearly half of full-time students reported sporadic study efforts and difficulties with motivation and also that they made “the minimum effort necessary to pass their courses”, but were largely satisfied with the assessment outcomes from that level of investment (Zimitat, 2003). Full-time students without other responsibilities reported significantly lower levels of satisfaction from study and more difficulties with motivation to study than did full-time students with other responsibilities (Zimitat, 2003). There was a low correlation between personal satisfaction from study, motivation and serious thoughts of leaving university studies in the groups of full-time students without other responsibilities, and full-time students in full-time employment (Spearman coefficient = 0.25 and 0.26 respectively).

Generally, full time students who were also in paid employment or also carers described similar perceptions of the level of intellectual challenge and engagement designed into teaching and learning experiences (Zimitat, 2003). However, full-time students without other responsibilities (of employment or caring) reported lectures to be less interesting and less stimulating than full-time students with other responsibilities. Full-time students without other responsibilities (of employment or caring) also showed a lower level of interaction with academic staff and informal study groups than full-time students who were primary income earner and primary carer for their household. There were no significant differences among any subgroups of students in terms of their overall satisfaction with teaching, or their perception of the overall positive benefit of their university experience to date. However, in terms of personal satisfaction, more than half of students who indicated serious thoughts of discontinuing study also reported that they derived low levels of personal satisfaction from studying. This is consistent with the view of
Kuh (1993) and Tinto (1993) who suggest that students who are positive about their identification as students and who gain satisfaction from their role as student are more likely to continue with their studies.

More than 40% of first year students indicated they had seriously thought of leaving study at the institution (Zimitat, 2003). Of these students, 77% had re-enrolled the following semester. This is a heartening finding when viewed as persistence in higher education. Nearly half of the surveyed full-time students who were primary income earners in their household had seriously considered leaving studies (Zimitat, 2003), whereas only 40% of full-time students without other responsibilities and 34% of those who were both primary income earner and primary carer in their household indicated such thoughts. In the group of full-time students without other responsibilities, there was a modest correlation between the perceived benefits of university experience and intentions to stay at university (Spearman rho=0.355). However of those who seriously considering leaving study, the majority (55-70%) in each group was doing so despite positive perceptions of course quality and overall benefits from university study. There was a low but significant correlation between perceptions of course quality and thoughts of leaving study (Zimitat, 2003). Interestingly, a greater proportion of the 6% of students who wished to leave higher education altogether had lower perceptions of the value of their university experience compared with others who had considered leaving study. In other words, university study for them was not worth further investment of time and energy.

**Deciding how to invest time and energy**
There was evidence to suggest that students were making decisions about where to spend time and emotional energy or effort consistent with the SET framework. Consistent with the notion that students may have to invest, or are choosing to invest their time elsewhere, full-time students in all groups indicated that they would like to spend more time involved with on-campus activities, if they were able. Similarly, whilst 40 % of all students indicated they made enough effort to pass or just pass their courses, 85% of all students indicated that they would be willing to spend more time and efforts to get better results. However, while students said they were happy to reduce time spent with family or at sport in order to invest in increased university effort to gain better results, none were keen to reduce the time spent in paid employment (where appropriate) or “hanging out” with friends. In terms of persistence, half of the students who had seriously considered leaving university studies indicated that they were not investing their maximal efforts in their studies (i.e. enough to pass).

**Looking to the future**
More than 40% of students indicated they had serious thoughts of discontinuing study. What factors persuaded students to continue with their studies? Those who decided to stay did so because of specific reasons important to them, even though they were not satisfied with all aspects of their university experience (Zimitat, 2003). Factors in their decision-making were identified as maintaining new friendships that they had made and influence from parents and friends (particularly
from students under 25 years of age), the convenient location of the campus, availability of unique course offerings at Griffith, the good university environment or to prove a point to themselves. Overwhelmingly the older students emphasised the importance of completing their studies to improve their employment opportunities and future life styles. Their responses included wanting “a degree and to do well in life”; ‘better employment prospects’; to be able to provide for a future family; to be a teacher and have a good career’. One student feared ‘end[ing] up in retail my whole life; another was anxious not to go back ‘to working 84 hours [a week] in a mine’.

Discussion

SET has value as a framework for understanding persistence in higher education in terms of student investment of time and energy. Central to our application of social exchange theory is the proposition that high levels of satisfaction and perceived benefits and rewards from study lead to increased investment in the student self at the expense of other selves, and this results in continuation of university study. The vast majority of students report a strong desire to do well in their studies; however, the effort put into study does not seem to match that desire since many of these students invested only a minimum effort in their studies. Thus “studenthood” seems to have a low priority and nearly 50% of students who reported serious considerations of leaving study had made the absolute minimum investment into their studies. McInnis and Hartley (2002) found that full time enrolled working students made decisions about focusing on core activities tied to assessment, rather than on optional activities with no immediate relationship to their graduation.

In order to understand persistence in higher education, we need to understand how the student self negotiates time and energy investment with the other selves. In situations where the hoped-for and feared future selves are in the same domain, in this case the career domain, and where the success of the hoped-for future self is dependent on the success of the student self, the student self is more likely to secure a substantial investment of time and energy (Oyserman & Markus, 1990). Further, Leondari, Syngollitou and Kiosseoglou (1998) found that students with elaborated positive selves (selves that are richly perceived and about which they hold mentally organized information) outperformed other students academically and showed greater persistence in tasks. We, therefore, propose that individuals who have elaborated student selves are not only more likely to negotiate substantially more time and energy investments for their studies, but are also more likely to engage in behaviours that promote academic success.

The Elaborated Student Self

At this point it is interesting to speculate on the ways in which the elaborated student self could be described. Two possible ways relate to theories of student learning in higher education, though others may be appropriate also.

Ramsden (1992) proposed that students adopt particular orientations to learning - surface and deep approaches to learning, which derive, in part, from their teaching
and learning environment. Surface learning does not require intellectual challenge of engagement, whilst deep learning involves a determined search for understanding of a discipline area. Students may have superficial or deep elaborations of their student self that may be influenced by their teaching and learning environment, university and broader social community (e.g. family). There is evidence that approaches to learning predict academic achievement (Diseth & Martinsen, 2003) and indeed there may be some correlation between approaches to learning and the nature of the elaborated student self, though that is not the focus of our research.

Elaboration of the student self, as a result of engagement with learning activities and the university community could also be considered in the same way that Biggs & Collis (1982) have categorised the outcomes of learning in the SOLO taxonomy. The SOLO taxonomy was developed as a systematic method for describing how student learners performances grow in complexity with deeper understanding of the underlying concepts and skills (Biggs & Collis, 1992). The pre-structural student self may represent the naïve student, unprepared for university study, not attending lectures and socially and intellectually isolated from other students. Uni-structural /Multi-structural students selves may have a conscious awareness of different selves and their roles in the life of the individual. However, the relational student self is one where the student becomes aware of the expectations and responsibilities of each self and relationships between the selves. Finally, an extended abstract student-self could further develop the ability to manage collaboration and synergies between the selves and roles so as to manage those selves optimally. It may be that motivation and satisfaction are the mediators of elaboration in development of the multi-structural student self through the abstract student self.

One way in which to unmask the extent of elaboration of student self may be revealed by the reasons students give for enrolling – e.g., following in the family footsteps or a deep desire to be a nurse. Students who are following areas of study that are of interest and who are aiming to develop talents and abilities, are more likely to engage more deeply in the learning process than students who are fulfilling parental expectations.

Other Factors That Could Moderate Elaboration of The Student Self

The Australian Government acknowledges the importance of student satisfaction and routinely surveys graduate students as part of its quality assurance practices. Satisfaction is associated with performance (Lee, Jolly, Kench, & Golonesi, 2002) and is predictive of persistence in higher education (Tinto, 1993). For some students, satisfaction with the university experience itself is of sufficient benefit to continue. For others, the perceived satisfaction that a hoped-for future self will bring may outweigh any temporary dissatisfaction experienced in the current higher education situation. Therefore, satisfaction with the experience is an important factor in terms of cost and benefits when considering continuing with higher education.

Human beings view themselves not merely as who or what they are, but also, and importantly, as who or what they have the potential to be (Chang, 2001). This power of possibility represents an important determination of how they exist and is
influenced by a range of possibilities from expectations of good things, or optimism, to expectations of bad things, or pessimism. Optimism and pessimism can also be seen in terms of hope and despair which “inspire feelings of well-being and is a spur to action” (Frank, 1968, p.383). Student comments about reasons for persisting often contained messages of optimism. Optimism influenced students to persist in their studies as part of their plan for a better future. Optimism acts as a mediator representing “a generative mechanism” through which it is able to influence the dependent variable of interest, in this case persistence (Baron & Kenny, 1986, p.1173). Optimism about one’s ability to achieve, based upon past achievements, also influences the investment in study. Martin (2002) considers whether students attribute success in study to optimism, as one element of academic resilience. Bandura (1977) also refers to such optimism about achieving goals and being able to meet academic challenges as ‘self-efficacy’. The example of student recognition of competence at university studies demonstrates how increased optimism about one’s studies, leads to greater satisfaction with studies, which ultimately influences persistence.

![Figure 1. A Model for Negotiating Competing Selves](image)

**Conclusions**

Social Exchange Theory appears to be an appropriate, though limited, model for examining first-year-student’s decision making regarding continuing or leaving university study. Decisions to leave university study appear to be unrelated to the number of roles or selves existing in the lives of first year students (Zimitat, 2003). SET assumes that the selves are independent and competitive and that they are defined largely by time-on-task. Our finding, that individuals with more selves are less likely to cease study than those with fewer selves, demands more attention. Clearly there are examples where the role of student and worker may be collaborative or synergistic, rather than competitive. Zimitat’s study (2002) sheds some light on how students conceptualise their role and their identity; however, establishing a measure of the strength of the student-self and satisfaction with
studenthood are needed for further consideration of SET to understand persistence, particularly as it applies to the negotiating power of and amongst selves.

We now intend to explore the notions of an elaborated student self who is able to understand and accept the expectations and responsibilities of each self, the relationships between the selves and who is able to manage collaboration and synergies between the selves in order to maximize the investment in his/her student self (Figure 1). Surveys of first year student cohorts clearly indicate that students of today have lives in which they have many different competing roles and responsibilities (McInnis et al, 2000) but decisions to leave university study appear to be unrelated to the number of roles or selves existing in the lives of first year students. In Zimitat’s study (2003) many students considered leaving university study, but most of them had re-enrolled the following year. This suggests that students are evaluating the decision to persist on a regular basis and that it could be moderated by other factors. Thus, we wish to determine if first year students persist at university because they have a strong student identity and to what extent satisfaction with study, optimism about their “future self” goals interact with that identity so that it can negotiate successfully their “competing selves” in ways that support positive student behaviour.

References


