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Published

2019

Conference Title

Handbook & Proceedings of Students Transitions Achievement Retention & Success (STARS)

Version

Version of Record (VoR)

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Hide-and-seek: Second-year undergraduates lost in the muddy middle.

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Abstract

Higher Education providers require various working definitions of the student cohorts they support. Inherent challenges exist where the focus is on developing holistic student experiences at particular points along the undergraduate journey. The differentiation of year level experiences is common in student experience literature yet characterising a year level can be “muddied” by academic level, the use of colloquial descriptors and the exclusion of some student populations in the experience literature. This paper provides practical examples for scholarly reporting of clearly articulated, sufficiently contextualised descriptors using a second-year student exemplar. It also explores the identification of “muddy in the middle” students from the perspective of a second-year undergraduate Bachelor of Science student and describes a successful strategy to locate and target effective support of students in the muddy middle.

Why does defining the second-year matter?

In Australia, student experience has become a key institutional priority (Shah & Richardson, 2016) driven by government policy. Priorities are associated with the quality of student experience, excellent learning experiences, inclusivity and provision of appropriate support and the incorporation of cutting-edge practices. In addition, a developing body of work indicates that the experiences of second-year students differ to those of first and final year students and therefore the support required for excellent holistic experiences also differs (Hunter, Tobolowsky, & Gardener, 2010; Milsom, Stewart, Yorke, & Zaitseva, 2014; Schreiner, 2018). Advocacy for holistic enriching experiences that extends beyond the traditional classroom, promote student engagement, retention and achievement, and enable high institutional competitive performance, are becoming core business (Felten et al., 2016).

Facilitating positive student experiences requires an understanding of where a student currently resides in their undergraduate journey and therefore, a collective understanding of how we define any given point. Acting on the student voice is of considerable benefit (Grebennikov & Shah, 2013) yet to do this requires an understanding of which student voice should be sought and where. Herein lies a challenge. How do we describe a second-year student, identify them in institutional systems, evaluate their needs and effectively design opportunities to support excellent student experiences? Therein lies the need for clearly articulated definitions of which students we seek to support, and mechanisms to readily identify them for directed engagement.

Second-year student experience literature tends to focus either on specific course level experiences or whole-of-institute studies, invoking poorly-defined terminology limited to colloquial terms without further contextualisation. Evaluation of the second-year undergraduate student experiences is a nascent area of higher education (HE) scholarship.

Who might we consider to be a second year?

Currently, the notion of a “second-year university student” has various interpretations among studies of student experience, with agreement on the difficulty in specifying the second year. The problem was raised tentatively by (Kawczynski, 2009) but was succinctly spelt out by Milsom and Yorke (2014, p. 14) who argued that

“the second year is left relatively undefined as, in a three-year *undergraduate* degree programme, it is sandwiched between the first and final years, both of which are more commonly understood.”

Whilst identifying key issues in defining the second-year, a critical transition between the two, it is influential for successful student progression (Hill & Tinker, 2018; Jevons & Lindsay, 2018; Schreiner, 2018), Milsom & Yorke (2014) did not propose guidance on a clear definition for reporting. Second-year is the least well differentiated of the three levels of undergraduate degree program experiences: the lack of reported working definitions lies at the crux of the problem.

An alternative collective definition from the US literature (which dominates research on second-year undergraduates or sophomores over the past twenty years) takes second-year students within a year of program as:

“A traditional aged, fulltime, first time student who has persisted into their second year of academic work where traditional age refers to a student being one who completed high school and matriculated directly into first year university.” (Kawczynski, 2009)

The limiting scope of traditional aged students, those between the ages of 18 and 22 (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), is helpful to some discussions but fails to evaluate the experiences of sub-populations (Gahagan & Hunter, 2008) including non-traditional aged students or those following alternative pathways through higher education, such as transfer students. In Australia, such students make up 39% of the student population (Robinson, 2018) rendering this an unhelpful definition, with questionable validity for supporting student experience evaluations considering broadening HE diversity and flexible enrolment options (Varghese, 2018).

An alternate definition considers only the number of years of attendance at a single higher education provider. This is one understanding of students in their ‘sophomore’ year as:

“[a]n undergraduate student who is in their second year of college - regardless of where they completed their first year” or the academic level of the degree program they are enrolled in. (Heier, 2012, p. 4)

This definition may be effective for some student engagement activities but excludes all part-time enrolments. Furthermore, the breadth of this student cohort is wide, with students potentially enrolled in any year level course at a given university. This definition stems primarily from researchers working in student affairs and is not helpful in supporting academic progression.

Many reports refer to this cohort merely by the colloquial descriptors of ‘sophomore’ or ‘second-years’ without further contextualisation. Yet these terms could apply to any student meeting either of the two descriptions above. Potential implementation or comparison of reported second-year experiences becomes impotent without this contextualisation.

Other descriptors express the amount of credit accumulated by a student (Graunke & Woosley, 2005; Sanchez-Leguelinel, 2008), a course the student has enrolled in at a second-year academic-year level (Calvo, Markauskaite, & Trigwell, 2010; Loughlin, Gregory, Harrison, & Lodge, 2013; Tower, Eddie, Bernadette, & Catherine, 2015), or students enrolled in a specific academic-year of study (McBurnie, Campbell, & West, 2012; Willcoxson, Cotter, & Joy, 2011). One study reported cohort by their enrolment into a quality framework accreditation level (Milsom & Yorke, 2014). These all have the benefit of focusing on the academic experiences of primarily second-year students and contextualising measures relative to progress.

Therefore, if reporting experiences associated with supporting academic success or addressing the unique challenges of second-year students' (Schreiner, 2018), descriptors should include the completion of a certain proportion of whole-of-program credit although this can be a highly variable measure, even within Australia, the discipline students are studying and their enrolment status. If the aim is to support students in their second year of college then further historical information regarding enrolment status (first time or transfer student) is important for contextualisation.

How can we identify a second-year student?

When it comes to the creation of holistic undergraduate student experiences, defining who a second-year student is forms only part of the challenge. A more practical issue is identifying the students to reach out and invite them to engage with activities. Institutionally, student identification codes use a referencing system that includes the semester and year of enrolment which can be employed as a search condition. Whilst beneficial for institutional reporting, it does not capture the true scope of enrolment when student experience is the area of focus.

Second-year level course codes can be used to reach second-year students. Some studies on second-year student experience use the course code descriptor to assist contextualising the cohort of interest as in some of the examples described above.

Consider the identification challenge in the context of a student taking a course at second academic year level (2000-level) of an Australian three-year undergraduate Bachelor of Science degree program, colloquially known as second-year. Along with many other Australian students (61% in 2016 (Robinson, 2018)), our student transitioned, within a few years of graduating from high school, into their first year of university in 2018 with no prior higher education experience. They began their degree in first semester 2018. In 2019, having successfully completed all first-year level prerequisite courses, they enrolled mostly in 2000-level courses. However, within the same second-year class sit peers, who identify as being a second-year student, even if the identification system does not recognise them as such. Variations may include (but are not limited to): students having unsuccessfully attempted several core first-year courses in the BSc either in the previous year or at some earlier point in time, at their current institution (tag 2017 or earlier) or at another (tag 2018); students not undertaking their degree program as a full-time student (tag 2016 or 2017); students having previously completed another degree program, at their current institution (tag prior to 2015) or another (tag 2018); students having taken an extended leave of absence between first and second-year (tag 2017 or earlier potentially back to 2010); students having transferred directly into the university and second-academic year via an alternate pathway (tag 2019); students beginning their first-year studies in second or summer semester (tag 2018 with a different semester tag, without all first-year academic elements). The challenges and experiences of all

these students likely have commonality with the exception of students undertaking an accelerated program (tag 2018) where students concurrently identify as second- and final-year students with different expectations and needs.

Consequently, individuating students to effectively support their second-year experiences using university enrolment tags, without excluding students may prove very challenging. At our university school level, we have found that an effective approach to identify second-year cohorts for directed student experience activities involves several steps at the beginning of each semester. We build a list of students self-identifying as second-years from strategically targeted core 2000-level courses. We then engage these students to add students who may have been missed in the first capture. This principle of self-identifying could be extended to the faculty or university level with activities promoted on the basis of identifiers (written and possibly pictorial) indicating who the activity is designed for and thus most likely to benefit. This allows highly engaged first-years to get ahead, self-identification of second-years and late bloomers to catch up on second-year support they may have missed.

Recommendations

The identification of second-year students in the muddy middle remains challenging, and advocated endeavour to effectively enhance their student experiences (Schreiner, Schaller, & Young, 2018). From this discussion two central ideas evolve. First, effective contextualised reporting of the cohort of interest is essential to enable consensus understanding, fair comparison with other work and optimise international audience impact. Second, appreciating the many ways students may self-identifying as a second-year student (independent of the university identification system) helps to capture the whole target audience for initiatives supporting second academic experiences.

Questions for discussion

Comment on how addressing second year experiences can enhance the STARS matrix.
What included measures ensure fair comparison of student experiences with other works?
What mechanisms do you utilise to specifically support the experiences of second year cohorts?

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