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"Network Teach": How a student led organisation supports the transition to university

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"NETWORK TEACH": How a Student-led Organisation Supports the Transition to University.

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Abstract: The transition to university and the first-year experience, which is crucial to student success, provides many personal, social and academic challenges for students. Over several decades, universities across Australia have implemented strategies to improve the attrition rate of first year students. This paper evaluates a program designed to meet the specific needs of students in the School of Education at a university in Perth, Western Australia. The Network Teach program is unique in that it is a student-run organisation offering social networking and academic support to all. This paper examines factors that may affect students in their first year of university studies, looks at the types of events the organisation offers and evaluates the overall benefits of Network Teach. The research identifies the support initiated by the students and the emergence of new cultural capital formed through the development of relationships that results in the reinvention of new identities as university students.

Introduction

Transition from high school to university has been a focus of research interest at universities around the world for several decades (McInnes, James & McNaught, 1995; Slatter & Petrie, 2008; Williams & Pepe, 1983). One area of particular concern is that, for a number of students, their first year of university is their only year at university. According to the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER, 2010), the attrition rates of first-year university students in Australia are close to one-third. Higher education institutions across Australia have been implementing strategies to combat rising attrition rates. This paper investigates one program aimed at enhancing the university experience of first-year School of Education students. 'Network Teach' (NWT) is the name given to the implementation of a student-based peer mentoring and support organisation at a long-established university campus in a central metropolitan suburb of Perth, Western Australia.

Network Teach is a registered incorporation, owned and run by second, third and fourth year students of the School of Education. These students volunteer for management positions within the organisation and form the Executive Team with the President and Vice President elected by the Executive Team. Three staff members from the School of Education volunteer to oversee and provide guidance to the Executive Team. The Network Teach program evolved from research into previous programs implemented at this university by the

lead author in conjunction with other colleagues at that university. Network Teach is responsible for the following:

- Organisation of events such as the first-year orientation, welcome events during semester such as barbeques, river cruises and the School of Education Ball as well as planning and coordinating events such as a Family Fun Day that links the university with the wider community.
- Organisation of Professional Development sessions for pre-service teachers, inviting professionals from a variety of external education organisations to speak to students at the university.
- Group revision sessions prior to exams. Network Teach timetable and run these sessions for students. Almost 200 students attended these sessions in 2012.
- Individual peer mentoring on request. Network Teach members who choose to volunteer for individual mentoring are required to undertake two hours of training provided through the School of Psychology.

In 2012, these events were well attended by School of Education students with up to 200 attending each of the two welcome barbeques and almost 150 the two river cruises. Network Teach has its own Facebook site with over 400 members and its own website, which receives approximately 150 hits each week.

Research was conducted over a 12-month period to examine the transitional process and retention of a cohort of first-year Primary and Early Childhood Bachelor of Education undergraduate students and investigate the effectiveness of the NWT program. The research was approved by the university ethics committee and was guided by four questions:

1. What factors affect significantly first-year student's ability to continue their studies their studies at university?
2. Did the 'Network Teach' program and associated events support a positive transition to university life?
3. Are peer-mentoring and the provision of support services by peers, effective strategies to support transition to first year?
4. What are the overall benefits of the 'Network Teach' program?

Literature review

Transition to university can pose many challenges for students in their first-year of study. Research has indicated that the first year experience has a significant impact on several factors, including; student satisfaction, whether students persist with university studies, and ultimately their success (James, Krause & Jennings, 2010; Muldoon & Wijeyewardene, 2012). Student transition, retention and success have been defined as key performance indicators of quality in Australian universities (ACER, 2008) thus promoting a key interest in first-year experience programs and initiatives (Johnston, Duff, & Quinn, 2009). A range of multi-faceted issues affect students in their transition to university life including, personal, social and academic concerns (Nelson, Smith, & Clarke, 2012). Another important aspect considered in this literature review is the support provided by various university systems.

Personal Concerns

One particular personal issue faced by first-year students is the lack of knowledge about what to expect. There may be a mismatch between perceived romantic notions and the reality of university life. Students may possibly have expectations of what their first year will

be like based on opinions from the media, their friends and their own desires (Kaufka, 2010). However, their early experiences may not meet these criteria. University life can be a culture shock and quite overwhelming in a new and unfamiliar environment. According to Briggs, Clark and Hall (2012) the transition to university for an individual 'is a personal investment of the cultural capital accrued through school and college education' (p.3). Cultural capital, an important consideration in terms of successful transition, is explained by Bourdieu (1983) as being the behaviours with which one is encultured, depending on social class, which are often so ingrained that they operate on a sub-conscious level and are hard to identify. The diverse nature of cultural capital is particularly evident in a first-year university cohort that may include mature-age students, first-in-the-family students, International students and those from rural areas and low socioeconomic backgrounds, who may be less informed about what to expect (James, Krause & Jennings, 2010).

School leavers also have a different set of issues, such as adjusting from 'really structured', 'spoon fed' environments where there was plenty of support from teachers who knew them well to an environment that requires self-regulated learning (Scanlon, Rowling, & Weber, 2007, p. 236). Transition to university requires students to be socially displaced and responsible for reinventing a new identity as university students, and can be particularly stressful on a psychological level. Cultural and social diversity dictates that the identity of students is not uniform and many studies have identified the potential isolation, stress and frustration experienced by students in their attempt to fit in to meet university expectations (Clerehan, 2003; Yorke & Thomas, 2003).

Social Concerns

Another major issue is the pressure from financial commitments. A reported 61 per cent of full-time students are working an average of 13 hours per week in addition to their studies (James, Krause & Jennings, 2010). Less time spent on campus restricts social engagement and inhibits the students' connectedness to the university. When work has a higher priority than studies, students are less likely to define themselves as university students. Scanlon, Rowling and Weber (2007), suggest this has an impact on "student identity development, and ultimately on student retention" (p. 225). Many school leavers also struggle with a lack of identity and feel isolated after having left their familiar circle of friends. According to Huon and Sankey (2002) students coming into tertiary institutions for the first time have to reorganise the way that they view themselves from a personal, as well as a social viewpoint. An important factor in developing a strong concept of self is to establish peer interactions in the early stages of transition in order to develop concepts of self that are associated with learning and achievement (Dweck, 1999). Students who feel isolated and disoriented during the transitional process may be inclined to abandon their studies (Boyd & Lintern, 2006; Briggs, et al., 2012). Making new friends and struggling to fit into existing social networks can be challenging. Providing support for students to make connections and to become integrated into the university community has been identified as assisting in commitment to and persistence with study (James, Krause & Jennings, 2010).

Social and academic engagement is well known as preventing the feeling of anonymity, promoting a sense of belonging and of being a part of a university community (Scanlon, Rowling, & Weber, 2007; Tinto, 2012). Data from the Australian Survey of Student Engagement (ACER, 2008, p. 51) indicate that only 24 per cent of students felt that they were given the support required to socialise with their peers in their first year with 37 per cent reporting that they received no support at all. Social networking strategies, if they are formal or informal, are considered as important to transition and social integration (Masters &

Donnison, 2010). Tinto (2012) acknowledges that student engagement, whether it is social or academic in nature, contributes to higher rates of retention.

Academic Concerns

Adjusting to academic expectations at university is a major difficulty faced by first-year students, particularly with regard to the standard of work required and the skills necessary for assessments (James, Krause & Jennings, 2010). Becoming familiar with university culture, new academic terms, study expectations and learning management systems also causes problems in transition. This is compounded with the lack of familiarity academics have with individual students and the level of support they can provide. Lecture and tutorial numbers have increased resulting in difficulty in getting to know students and there is now less time that academics can spend with students due to higher workloads and pressures of increasing research output (Scanlon, Rowling, & Weber, 2007). Relationships with academic staff are important in assisting in learner identity and reducing feelings of anonymity. At university, students are responsible for their own engagement in learning which sometimes can be problematic, especially for school leavers. Tinto (2012) suggests employing pedagogies of engagement such as project-based learning, problem-based learning and cooperative or collaborative learning. Social involvement in this way fosters connections among faculty, staff and peers promoting a greater satisfaction and higher retention (Tinto, 2012).

University Support Systems

Programs targeting attrition rates have been rolled out widely across Australian universities aiming to address first-year dropout rates. A major failing of these attrition programs is that they are vague and generic (Danahar, Bowser, & Somasundarum, 2008). The programs tend to be targeted toward first-year students as a whole for example orientation programs, instead of being tailored towards individual faculties.

The support provided by university systems is seen as a vital element of successful transition through the provision of opportunities and support for socialisation and adaption. This support, recommended by Briggs et al (2012, p. 7) and Tinto (1998), among others, includes the early building of relationships between students and staff, low student staff ratios in first-year classes, the provision of information to students regarding staff availability, the appointment of staff as first-year coordinators working with small groups of students and using the use of most student focused members of staff in first-year units. Read, Archer and Leatherwood (2003) stress that academic staff hold the key to the establishment of the 'social capital' that students need to acquire to construct their new identities that are needed to persist at university.

The present economic climate dictates however that at many universities this support is lacking. This can be attributed to the 'lean and mean' university pedagogies that have resulted in a decrease in staff-student contact hours and increased tutorial sizes, which reduce the sense of intimacy that students once shared with their tutors. Developments in universities over the past decade have decreased the opportunities for academic and social relationships to occur. Given the diverse nature of the student population, the trends described above can impair 'feelings of connectedness to the university and hence on students identity development, and ultimately on student retention' (Scanlon, et al., 2007, p. 25).

Method

Research Design

A mixed-methods research design was used to address the research questions proposed. The quantitative component consisted a questionnaire distributed at two time intervals, both before (pre) and after (post) participants' first-year of university. The qualitative component consisted of four focus groups made up of student participants and NWT mentors.

Participants

A convenience sample of first-year Primary and Early Childhood Education students from a university in a metropolitan suburb of Perth participated in this study. All students who had consented to participate in the research received both the pre and post quantitative questionnaires in a lecture setting. Overall 243 participants completed the pre-test questionnaire and 173 the post-test questionnaire. For the purposes of comparative research, the study analysed only the data of students who had responded to both pre- and post- testing measures. The study's sample size was reduced greatly due to this decision. Taking this into account, the final sample was comprised of 102 participants, of whom 87 were females. Most students who participated indicated that their age was '18 and younger'.

Participants in the qualitative component of the research were recruited through first-year class tutorials. Those who were willing to take part in the focus groups were asked to remain behind after class. NWT mentors were recruited through the program by the president. Mentors who were willing to participate did so during a NWT meeting. All together there were four focus groups, two for first-year students and two for the NWT mentors. Each group consisted of approximately 6-10 people.

Materials

The pre- and post-test questionnaires used by the researchers were based on surveys designed and administered by colleagues at the same university. The pre-test questionnaire contained basic demographic and enrolment questions such as age, gender, student identification number and type of study (full time/ part time), as well as four questions addressing attitudes and expectations of University. The post-test questionnaire also consisted of demographic questions, plus eight questions addressing their experience of their first-year of university. The questionnaires took approximately five to ten minutes to complete.

The qualitative aspect of the research was addressed using two different sets of semi-structured focus group interview schedules developed by the researchers. The first set of focus group questions was developed for first-year university students and addressed questions about the NWT program. The second set was for the mentors of the NWT program. The focus groups were conducted by one of the researchers

Procedure

The pre-test questionnaire was administered to first-year students as part of a lecture for one of their first-year units. Each student was given the pre-test questionnaire and was required to fill it out during class time. When students had completed the questionnaires, these were collected by the lecturer. The post-test questionnaire was administered in the same way, during a lecture conducted toward the end of the academic year. At the end of the final

semester of the academic year, a random selection of students, who had completed both pre and post questionnaires, was invited to participate in focus groups. The first two groups consisted of first-year students in the Primary and Early Childhood Education courses, while the second involved a sample of NWT student mentors. Both sets of interview questions addressed different aspects of the NWT program. Interviews were recorded and transcribed using the program NVivo. Interviews were transcribed in Playscript format and coded using thematic analysis.

Results

What factors impact significantly on first-year student's ability to continue their studies at university?

In the pre-test ($N = 85$), support from family and self-discipline/organisational skills were most commonly ranked as being most influential to first-year students' ability to continue their studies (Mode = 1), followed by balancing work and study commitments (Mode = 2), support from peers (Mode =4), support from staff (Mode = 5), support from peer mentors (Mode = 6), and financial resources (Mode = 7). In the post-test ($N = 85$), support from family was also most commonly ranked as being the most influential to first-year students' ability to continue their studies (Mode = 1), followed by support from peers and self-discipline/organisational skills (Mode = 2), balancing work and study commitments (Mode = 3), support from staff (Mode = 5), financial resources (Mode = 6) and support from peer mentors (Mode = 7).

A Wilcoxon signed rank test (Appendix 5) indicated that three factors differed significantly between pre-test and post-test. Support from peers significantly increased in perceived impact ($p = .001$), as did support from family ($p = .01$), while support from peer mentors significantly decreased in perceived impact ($p = .02$).

Did the 'Network Teach' program and associated events support a positive transition into university life?

A chi-square test for goodness of fit (with $\alpha = .05$) was used to assess whether some levels of agreement were indicated more than others in a sample of 102 first-year education students. Table 1 indicates the frequency of responses to each of the items in the scale.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Having the activities available made me feel welcome at ECU	23	61	17	1	0
Having the activities available helped to me settle in at ECU	14	44	39	4	1
Having the activities available made me feel part of the School of Education community	15	58	27	1	1
Having the activities available has helped me to make friends at ECU	9	39	48	5	1

Table 1. Frequency of responses indicating the level of agreement to items measuring positive attitude towards Network Teach (N = 102)

The chi-square test was statistically significant χ^2 (11, $N = 102$) = 98.94, $p < .001$ indicating that the response 'agree' was reported with significantly greater frequency than the other available responses (strongly agree, neutral, disagree and strongly disagree). Table 2 indicates the percentage of participants who responded with 'agree' or 'strongly agree' for each item.

	Percentage
Having the activities available made me feel welcome at ECU	**82.4%**
Having the activities available helped to me settle in at ECU	**56.9%**
Having the activities available made me feel part of the School of Education community	**71.6%**
Having the activities available has helped me to make friends at ECU	**47.1%**

Table 2. Percentage of participants who responded with "agree" or "strongly agree" for each item measuring positive attitudes towards Network Teach (N = 102)

Are peer mentoring and the provision of support services by Network Teach peer mentors effective strategies to support transition to first-year?

This question was addressed by analysing both the quantitative and qualitative components of the research. The first section was addressed using two questionnaire items. Students were asked the extent to which they agreed that 'It was good to know that there was a NWT mentor I could contact if I needed advice' (Item 1) and 'The NWT mentor's advice was helpful when I first started' (Item 2). Most respondents agreed to item one (56.8 per cent), however 'neutral' was the most common response to Item two (47.7 per cent). Just over a third of respondents indicated 'agree' to Item two. When asked if they had contacted an NWT mentor for advice, only five students who completed both of the questionnaires indicated that they had done so.

The qualitative interviews reaffirm the quantitative findings. Almost all NWT mentors stated that they had very few students approach them for support or advice:
I've only had one student come to visit me. It was for referencing and also understanding how to unpack a question from a lecturer and also understanding a unit outline.

Many also commented that students were not using the mentoring services correctly. Instead of asking for advice and helpful strategies, students were asking for specific answers to their enquiries:
I feel that they may not have been as interested in the mentoring or had the wrong ideas about what mentoring actually entailed. I feel like they just wanted me to give them everything. I referred them to learning advisors but I don't think they actually took that up.

The mentors were able to identify a number of benefits of peer mentoring for first-year students:
It's nice to know that there is someone else there that you can help or can help you if you have any problems.

I think it's helpful to have peers doing the mentoring because they can say, number one, when you're a first-year you know where you can go for help, and number two, it's not quite so daunting. [They are] much more approachable.

First-year students reported that having student mentors allowed them to learn from the experience of students who had faced the same challenges that they face in their studies:

…it's good to know that there are people we can go to if we need to that are ahead of us in the same course or whatever so they know what we are talking about.

What are the overall benefits of the Network Teach program?

The qualitative results from the focus group interviews with the first-year students highlighted a number of strengths of the NWT program. The students seemed to have enjoyed the wide range of activities that was offered. In addition, the students also acknowledged the carry-on effects of these events and activities. Many of the students stated that these events made them feel a part of something and that it helped grow and strengthen bonds between them and fellow students:

I think it's great, the river cruises and the ball. That makes you feel like you're a part of a group as well... That you're a part of something.

I think it's really enjoyable to work with a team to create positive experiences for others during university as well and just be a part of it. It's good to be with a group of people who really want to be good teachers.

Other than the events and activities, the overall response of the Network Teach program was positive. The students enjoyed the fact their School had their own support services which seem to make the program more inviting and personalised. One student commented:

It's reassuming to know that there is support that is specifically for our course, that's not for the general students services support that are a bit generic, which I mean that's good too, it's better than nothing. But it's good to know that there are people we can go to if we need to that are ahead of us in the same course or whatever so they know what we are talking about.

As well as the benefits the NWT program has for the first-year students the NWT mentors also gain from the program. In the interviews with the mentors, many of them highlighted the positive effect the program has had on them personally. Not only were they feeling good about helping students who needed it, they were also benefiting in other areas as well, such as making friendships:

I guess it boosted my confidence in what I was doing. …, it made me feel good to give back to the community and it creates bonds that you know are going to last and you just get that interconnectedness with your peers a bit more.

The student mentors also described how this program was providing them with skills and new techniques relevant for teaching. One mentor mentioned how they learnt to adapt when talking to different people and when conveying information. The NWT program benefits the mentors by giving them skills they feel are useful for their future careers:

… just learning how to do, explain things in a way that people understand and do things in a different way. Sometimes you give one explanation and they can't understand it so you have to have a different approach, which is all a part of teaching. It is practice for my career."

"I think the best thing also is that it kind of prepares you for being active at your school, when you go out there and become a teacher. As you said before, you're not just doing the bare minimum and getting an education, you're interested in furthering others education so it's not just I'm doing this job for the money it's, I'm doing this job because I love it.

Discussion

The objective of this research was to establish the efficacy of a student-led organisation in supporting students' transition to university. Of particular interest was how successfully the organisation met the needs of a wide range of first-year. Those who were part of the NWT organisation provided specific support to students in the School of Education as they had intimate knowledge of the teacher education course and the requirements to be successful. This enabled a relationship between the incoming students and the NWT members to be established whereby support was offered from those that had already successfully found their place in the university. These relationships between new and current students encourage the establishment of new cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1983). The diverse cultural capital of the new students was in fact replicated in the group of existing students acting as role models in NWT. New students therefore have the opportunity to assimilate to university life with the support of an 'equal' in terms of cultural capital and social contacts very early in their tertiary experience.

A successful component of the Network Teach program was the provision of social events to establish a sense of belonging, the importance of which has been outlined by Tinto (2012). The analysis of the data indicates that a significant proportion of first-year students are responded positively to the social events and activities offered by the Network Teach program. This positive response is encouraging as it can be deduced that these events are establishing a sense of belonging and connectedness among first-year students. This connectedness is very important in establishing a student's identity and developing concepts of self (Dweck, 1999). The social events that are available through Network Teach are designed and implemented by students of similar ages and interests, rather than by university staff, who may be significantly older and less in touch with younger students' interests. Activities such as river cruises and formal balls were well attended. The use of social media proved popular as indicated by students visiting the Network Teach Facebook page. This link provided by Network Teach allowed students to mix socially with their peers, albeit electronically. Although not face to face, the connections made between students through the Network Teach Facebook page should not be discounted in this study. According to Bazarova, Taft, Choi, and Cosley (2013), social media 'creates opportunity for acquiring social connections and resources' (p. 122) and provides 'new contexts for social expression and engagement' (p. 132).

Factors that affect a student's ability to continue their studies at university are of great importance to tertiary education institutions (Slatter & Petrie, 2008). The results of this study indicate that the factors the students perceived to have the greatest impact on their studies changed significantly once they had completed a full year. Support from peers and family significantly increased in importance as the year went on while the support from one-on-one peer mentors decreased. These results supported previous research (Raffo & Reeves, 2000). This outcome can be explained by understanding that identity is an 'emergent phenomenon' and individuals develop their identity through social interaction (Scanlon, et al., 2007, p. 227). Initially, students would experience a sense of loss due to displacement and change of context in their transition to university. Scanlon et al (2007) found in their research that social interaction in the new learning context was the key to identity formation. Raffo and Reeves, (2000) state that friendship networks give students the feeling that they have some control, primarily because the institutional cues were often transmitted by other students. Therefore, the recognition of the importance of peer networks, while initially not viewed as an important aspect of staying at university became significantly more important to students toward the end of their first year. The formation of social support networks through initiatives provided by

NWT may have led to this post-test recognition of the positive influence of these support structures.

While students were positive about most aspects of NWT, results indicate that first-year students were not comfortable in attending the one-to-one mentoring sessions offered by NWT members. The results indicate that students were reassured and comforted to know that there was a NWT mentor they could contact if they needed one. The results also indicated that out of the sample population only five students actually reached out to a NWT mentor. It is reported that the few first-year students that did attend were not looking for guidance, advice and strategies to assist with their studies, but rather were looking for a 'quick fix' or answers to assignment questions.

On the basis of this premise, it is suggested that first-year students do not perceive other students, irrespective of their year level or status, as able to fulfil the role of 'academic advisor'. The desired contact is with academic staff which is seen to provide a relationship reflective of their past experience in a school context with their teachers. Students who participated in the research reported by Scanlon et al (2007) assumed they would have a similar relationship with their lecturers as they did with teachers in the learning environment of the final years of secondary school (p.232). When this anticipated and desired relationship and support did not eventuate, due to various factors including large class sizes and a lack of physical access to lecturers, students were not comfortable with replacing this desired contact with peer contact. It is surmised that first-year students did not perceive this peer based one-to-one relationship as beneficial in their establishment of their identity as a 'new learner' or as a means of building important 'social capital' (Read, Archer & Leatherwood, 2003). Students may have perceived that requiring a peer mentor was admitting to a 'deficit' that needed to be addressed in order for the student to engage in the learning process. As a new student, this would certainly not be seen as a positive step in creating 'social capital' or esteem in the eyes of fellow students.

In order to address this, the peer mentoring aspect of the NWT model was renamed the 'Excellence Program' in 2013, and promoted by NWT as being a value-added program provided for those students in first year who wish to excel in their studies. It will be interesting to review the results of this change in terminology.

It would be remiss if the benefits of NWT were only noted from a first-year student perspective. It is evident from this research that the second and third year students who were part of the NWT organisation, also benefited from the social framework providing them with a sense of belonging and a sense of community. Comments such as '...it made me feel good to give back to the community' and '...it creates bonds that you know are going to last and you just get that interconnectedness with your peers a bit more' indicate that belonging to NWT, as well as giving students opportunities for leadership and skills to use for future teaching, also emphasised the symbiotic relationship between cognitive development, learning and social interactions, representative of the sociocultural perspective of learning described by Vygotsky (1978).

Conclusion

This paper has considered the many and varied aspects that can either hinder or contribute to a successful first-year experience. The research that has been addressed highlights the benefits of a student led program, NWT. The program provides peer connections through its social networking and academic support systems thus enabling a greater sense of identity. In turn, opportunities for leadership have been established as students support and encourage one another. The relationships established are an essential

system of exchange to empower knowledge through the use of collective resources or what Bourdieu (1983) refers to as new cultural capital within the group. The most vital aspect of the program is the ownership of the organisation by the students themselves and their ability to collaborate with university staff when support is required. NWT is a dynamic system of social synergy, a constantly evolving organisation that continues to adapt and change to meet the diverse needs of the current student cohort.

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