

“I didn’t think I’d get there, but with the right help, I made it”!

Enhancing Student retention in higher education

CONTEXT

Retention is an extensively studied matter in higher education, yet despite great resolve, **translating what is known about student retention into “forms of action leading to substantial gains in student persistence and graduation”, is still beyond the capacity of the majority of institutions** (Tinto, 2006, p. 5). For more than 30 years, the *Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies* (STEPS) pre-university access course has consistently sustained high annual student retention rates of around 70% as compared to similar programs. Offered by a regional Queensland Australian university, STEPS typically **enrols the highest number of students from multiple government designated equity groups in Australia**. The fundamental aim of STEPS is to prepare non-traditional students with skills, knowledge and confidence for higher education. Most students are first in family to embark on higher education, thus in uniquely individualised ways, between STEPS commencement and conclusion, students engage in a context that is



unfamiliar to most of them. This ‘not so sure’ space can be conceptualised as a borderland between their lives prior to STEPS and completion of STEPS. It is within this borderland space that **theoretically informed pedagogical practices and institutional protocols can either enhance or inhibit inclusion**.

METHODOLOGY

Using the findings of analysed data from over 5000 end of unit (subject) voluntary and anonymous student evaluations of 12 STEPS units (term 1 2016 -

term 1 2017), this qualitative research draws from Alsup (2006) and Gee (2014) to use borderland Discourse analysis as a conceptual and analytical framework to demonstrate the often tumultuous experience enabling education can be for some students. Uncovering such Discourses seeks to highlight aspects that positively assist students in strengthening their studenthood, but also highlight **contradictions and ambiguities about what it can be like to be a student formally preparing for higher education**. This was evidenced by the various ways in which students described and positioned ‘best aspects’ of STEPS, and those aspects they considered required improvement. From the final synthesis of data emerged dominant borderland Discourses that provide some indication of the dichotomous experiences of students in enabling courses.

FINDINGS

Three dominant borderland Discourses to emerge were inclusivity, exasperation and empowerment. Fundamentally, students attributed ‘safe’, **inclusive learning environments in which they felt supported and valued by empathetic teacher** as promoting greater self-knowledge, responsibility and inspiration. Secondly, the **structured, scaffolded curriculum** supported by quality resources, and flexible study options, **imbued in students a sense of capability, achievement and consequent empowerment**. However, it was also found that lack of understanding of institutional protocols, time limitations for processing and demonstrating new knowledge, and competing life role pressures led to frustration and annoyance for some students. Thus **pedagogical strategies and relational practices in STEPS that enhance student identity and subsequent course completion could be said to perform an important role in student retention**. Conversely, focusing on aspects identified by students as not enhancing success require attention. These findings contribute to the cache of best practice identified by others (Burke, et al., 2016; Bennett, et al., 2012; Hodges et al., 2013; Tinto, 2006), and make a valid contribution to educators in both enabling/pre-university courses and higher educational contexts in which non-traditional students negotiate their studenthood.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Pedagogical and relational practices in formal learning contexts that do not problematise unique learning requirements of non-traditional students can enhance their academic and personal success. The provision of a scaffolded, structured curriculum in a ‘fun’ yet ‘safe’ environment in which students’ prior learning, skills and experiences are valued and capitalised upon, has the **generative power to encourage sustained participation and pleasure in the formal learning context**. **Likewise, listening to students and responding to their unique learning requirements has great potential in creating empowering learning environments** in which retention can be directly and positively impacted.

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