

Experiences of bridging program students at a regional satellite campus

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The benefits of higher education to individuals and to society are acknowledged both in Australia and internationally. Increased access to higher education means that greatly diverse students are beginning their tertiary learning journey. We investigate the experiences of a group of non-traditional students undertaking a tertiary preparation program at a regional university, based at a satellite campus in a low socio-economic area. Bourdieu's conceptual tools are used to frame the significance that symbolic capital has on the experience of students. Using phenomenography, the experiences of nine students were recorded and interpreted. Interviews were used to identify which aspects of the university experience they considered were the most important. Students' motivation, social networks, staff-student interactions and the various challenges were among the most important experiences mentioned. These combined to create three analogous categories, stairway, doorway and hallway (SDH). The students' experiences in the program may be likened to a stairway

that must be climbed; a doorway that must be passed through; or a hallway that offers opportunities for exploration along the journey. The SDH model is a useful way to categorise students, to identify their experiences and develop strategies to support them.

Keywords: *Tertiary preparation, bridging programs, non-traditional students, satellite campus, widening participation, access to higher education*

Introduction

Tertiary education benefits both the individual and society. Access to university has been extended through tertiary preparation or bridging programs for students without the requisite educational qualifications for direct entry. The provision of satellite campuses outside major geographical areas has also facilitated wider participation, meaning that many new students come to university from distinctly different backgrounds, with different support systems and different life experiences from those of traditional students. This paper reports on the experiences of a small group of students, who were all studying a bridging program on a regional satellite campus in a low socio-economic area. A phenomenographic approach was used to allow the students to report their experiences in their own words. Following semi-structured interviews, the researchers determined which issues were most important to the students under investigation, and three thematic categories arose. These categories were analogous to seeing the program as a Stairway, a Doorway or a Hallway (SDH). The implications of the issues experienced by the students aligning to each category are discussed, as well as the potential for supporting further research.

Context

The program discussed here is a bridging program at a Queensland regional university with currently more than 500 students enrolled each semester. Enrolment is equity-based with anyone over seventeen eligible to enrol. Approximately half the students who enrol in the program complete it, and half of those students then enrol in an undergraduate degree at the same university.

Funded by the Australian Government's Education Investment Fund,

the University recently constructed a satellite campus in a regional, long established, low socio-economic area. The 2011 census showed that nearly 45% of adults in the region earn less than \$400 weekly and that 48% of adults have a post-school qualification compared to 54% nationally (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). This illustrates the value of a satellite campus in the area making higher education more accessible. Classes commenced at the new campus in semester 2, 2013.

This campus offers a limited range of programs including business, commerce, primary education, nursing and the bridging program called Tertiary Preparation Pathways. Programs are designed mainly at the parent campus. Academics teaching in the program at the satellite campus are all primarily employed to teach at the parent campus but travel there to deliver lessons face to face. Student support staff, such as Academic Skills Advisors and library staff also visit the satellite campus regularly to assist students.

Theoretical background to the study

Students come to university with different dispositions such as backgrounds, motivations, and life experiences. This can be understood using Bourdieu's (1984) conceptual tools of habitus, capital and field. Bourdieu (1984) describes these collective histories, and internal rules, regulations and understandings as "habitus". A person's habitus relates to the "field" in which they find themselves. The field is the specific social and cultural environment with its own rules, regulations, expectations and discourses. The relationship between habitus and field determines a person's comfort and ability to cope with a situation (Webb, Schirato & Danaher, 2002). For example, students who are lacking the required symbolic capital that make higher education a field in which they could feel comfortable, will be less likely to adapt to the new environment (Grenfell, 2012).

Symbolic capital refers to social and cultural capital, terms coined by Bourdieu (1984) to refer to the attributes that are valued within a particular culture. Social capital refers to family or cultural heritage and social networks whereas cultural capital refers to the knowledge that can be gained by attending higher education, in this context (Grenfell, 2012). Bourdieu asserted that "cultural needs are the product of upbringing and education..." and that "preferences in literature, painting or music, are closely linked to educational level ... and secondly to social origin" (1984:1). Symbolic capital can be lacking in families from low SES areas,

thereby making the field of higher education a place in which they are unlikely to feel at home.

Students commencing higher education with a cultural background that does not include a familiarity with tertiary level studies could find themselves at a disadvantage. They might feel a form of culture shock because of their unfamiliarity with the cultural traditions of the learning environment (Zepke & Leech, 2005). These traditions are ingrained in the culture of higher education institutions, further supporting a bias toward traditional students (Yorke & Thomas, 2003).

The Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) database provides a broad description of non-traditional students as “adults beyond traditional school age (beyond the mid-twenties), ethnic minorities, women with dependent children, underprepared students, and other special groups who have historically been underrepresented in postsecondary education” (ERIC, 1977). Using this definition, all students enrolled in this bridging program are non-traditional students regardless of their age, ethnicity, marital status or external responsibilities as they are under-prepared for undergraduate study and face educational challenges.

Educational challenges can be exacerbated by income disadvantage, leading to a lack of the symbolic capital required to make a student comfortable in the field of academia. The Adult Learner Social Inclusion Project (Griffith University & QUT, 2012) noted that more than 60% of students enrolled in bridging programs received welfare benefits from the government. This is more pronounced in regional areas (DEEWR, 2010). Another reason for beginning university in a bridging program is that for some, English is not their first language, or their cultural background may be different. These factors suggest a risk of attrition in traditional studies (Jackling & Natoli, 2011). Other students commence bridging programs for reasons unrelated to academic achievement or desire to continue onto further tertiary study. These include an increase in confidence, development of skills for employment or improved social life (Bond, 1996). Tertiary preparation and bridging programs offer these students a low cost, low stakes taste of higher education.

Tertiary preparation and bridging programs have a retention rate of around 50% (Murray & Klinger, 2012). Some of the barriers that students face in completing their study may be structural (such as

university policies) or individual (such as child-care responsibilities) (Aird et al., 2010). Globally a large percentage of the students who complete bridging programs do not continue onto undergraduate studies at the same institution (OECD, 2012). However, UNESCO (1998:1) defines higher education as “all types of studies, training, or training for research at the post-secondary level, provided by universities or other educational establishment”. The implication of this for bridging programs is that they are tasked with providing access to higher education, regardless of where the students continue their study. Hodges et al. (2013) claim that some attrition in a bridging program is desirable as it acts as a filter prior to study as students discontinue if they feel they are unable to continue and complete a program. Consequently, traditional measures of attrition and retention are not relevant to tertiary bridging programs (Hodges et al., 2013).

There is limited research comparing student outcomes from satellite campuses and the parent campus. Todd and Ballantyne’s (2006) analysis of the student experience at another regional satellite campus in a new master-planned urban development noted that students were generally pleased with their satellite campus experience including staffing, class sizes and rapport with teaching staff. They were less satisfied with the availability of teaching and academic support staff outside of class times, the reduced likelihood of face-to-face teaching, and some organisational and structural issues. Students did comment favourably on the social networks and positive relationships they were able to form in the community environment of a smaller campus. Similarly, Ballantyne (2012) identified a feeling of ownership among the students at a satellite campus. It may not be the size but the physical environment of a campus that encourages students to remain (Wyatt, 2011)

Locating campuses in low socio-economic regional areas, even if the course range is limited, appears to positively influence university enrolments (DEEWR, 2010). Satellite campuses also play a positive role in the local community. Campuses in regional Australia are “central to regional economic and labour force benefits, including retaining graduates and professionals in the regions, generating diverse employment opportunities, and promoting regional research and investment” (DEEWR, 2010:2). Easy physical access to a study location, low travelling times, and the lower associated costs will

positively influence a student's decision to commence and continue higher education (DEEWR, 2010). Even so, students in regional and low socio-economic areas are less likely to attend university regardless of its location (DEEWR, 2010), and the limited courses available may not meet the needs of students in that region. Nonetheless, 90% of the respondents to a 2006 survey felt that the regional campus was a positive asset to their community (Bruning, McGrew & Cooper, 2006).

Students enrolling in a bridging program at a regional satellite campus are in a significantly different position from traditional students on parent campuses. These students are often academically under-prepared, may be older than average or have multiple roles and responsibilities, are frequently from low socio-economic areas, and do not have the benefit of the full facilities of the parent university campus. Bourdieu's (1984) concept of the field of higher education and the symbolic capital required to feel comfortable in such a situation can be used to explain how these students, limited by their background and experiences, are feeling as they enter the bridging program. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that the needs of these students are the same as the needs of traditional students, who possess the symbolic capital, and are studying on a parent campus. The needs of the non-traditional students must first be identified in order to meet them. We investigated the experiences of students studying in a tertiary preparation program on a new satellite campus in a long established, low socio-economic area using the research question: *In what ways do students experience a tertiary preparation program on a satellite campus?*

Method

The methodology was based on the general principles of phenomenography, which was used to investigate the student experience and to answer the research question. This methodology was selected as it provides a way of collectively analysing individual experiences, and understanding the differences both between individuals and within individuals (Marton & Booth, 1997). It is often used to explore people's experiences of learning and understanding in different contexts (Marton & Booth, 1997) and to create a description of a thing, event or concept, as the participants perceive it. Phenomenography recognises that the experience of a phenomenon is the combination of the subject (the person experiencing) and the object (the phenomenon itself) and does not consider the two in isolation. The language of the participants is a true reflection of the

experience they have encountered (Yates, Partridge & Bruce, 2012). The student experience of the program is a product of the students' habitus combined with the social and structural field of the course. The students will conceive a range of overall experiences, and these conceptions will affect their outcomes. Phenomenography acknowledges that the descriptions achieved using this methodology may not accurately reflect how a situation actually is, but instead how it is perceived by those people who undergo the experience, because it "looks at issues through the eyes of the key players" (Trigwell, 2000:65).

The study was located at the satellite campus, which is in a low socio-economic area with many students being the "first in family" to attend university. One of the researchers attended an orientation lunch at the satellite campus and students enrolled in the course were invited to participate; subsequent invitations were proffered during lectures in the second week of classes. Fifteen students expressed interest, nine of whom scheduled interviews when contacted after week five. These students (four male and five female) aged from 17 to 38 (mean 25) were interviewed for 25-45 minutes, all by the same researcher. They represented half of the students who completed the program on this campus during semester 2, 2013 (Young, personal communication 2014).

Semi-structured interviews were used (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009). Phenomenographic interviewing requires the interviewer to bracket their preconceptions about the experience under investigation before commencing interviews. Kvale and Brinkman (2009) call this "deliberate naiveté" and describe it as the process of being open to new and unanticipated phenomena and being critical of presuppositions in an absence of pre-determined categories. The questions were designed to be open, general and easy to discuss including educational histories, their first day in the course and what they liked or disliked about the program.

There were no predetermined categories for the thematic analysis of the data. The researchers first looked for the structural aspects of the experience – the characteristics that participants describe most commonly. These related to their motivation for study, the social aspects of the program, interactions with staff and other students, and the challenges that they faced. These structural aspects then combined to form the referential aspects that represent the outcomes according

to the principles of phenomenography. These referential aspects are the final categories of description. Although the use of analogy in the evolving methodology of phenomenography is not the norm, the researchers felt that as the categories emerged they created themselves into the SDH format.

Results and Discussion

Demographics

Table 1 gives an overview of the gender, age, study and work status of the nine students who participated in this research project and pseudonyms have been assigned.

Table 1: Participant demographics including study and work status

| Pseudonym | Gender | Age | Number of subjects enrolled | Study status | Work status |
|-----------|--------|-----|-----------------------------|--------------|--------------------|
| Cody | M | 20 | 3 | F | Not employed |
| Bailey | M | 38 | 2 | P | Carer |
| Kerry | F | 23 | 2 | P | Not employed |
| Morgan | F | 19 | 3 | F | Employed part time |
| Alex | F | 19 | 3 | F | Not employed |
| Bernie | F | 31 | 4 | F | Not employed |
| Jamie | M | 22 | 4 | F | Not employed |
| Sam | M | 17 | 3 | F | Not employed |
| Cassidy | F | 33 | 2 | P | Not employed |

Note. F=Full time; P=Part time: Full time load = 4 subjects

Only one of the nine students interviewed was currently in paid work. This is in contrast to the research by James, Krause and Jennings (2010) where in 2009, 61% of full time students and 84% of part time students were in some sort of paid employment. This could reflect the employment prospects of the geographical area, and may explain the enrolment of some students.

Statements made by the students fitted in a number of categories that made up the structural aspects of the experience. These categories were purpose or motivation for studying, the social aspect of studying, student-teacher relationships and challenges to study.

Purpose / motivation for studying

Students generally identified that they enrolled in the bridging program as a gateway to an undergraduate degree:

Kerry - I want to be able to get into my first preference, which is nursing and midwifery.

Morgan - I would like to go on and do a bachelor of primary education

However, in discussion, students identified other motivations. For example, the students who were parents expected that their university study would positively influence the aspirations of their children:

Bernie - My oldest son... he was so excited that I was doing a university course and he went and told everyone at school. So I think it encourages him to know that he can do something as well.

Wainwright and Marandet (2010) claimed that university study could have as powerful an effect on the dependent children of students as it does on the students themselves.

Another student wanted to increase his self-efficacy and prove to himself that he could study at university level.

Cody - I've always wanted to do uni but just felt like I'm really just not smart enough to do it ... I want to be able to show myself that I've passed.

Some students were driven toward tertiary education by external forces, for example, avoiding unemployment, rather than an intrinsic desire for learning.

Aaron - I've been trying to look for work and just having no luck whatsoever. Just been picking up a bit of work here and there... moved to Brisbane, had a bit of work, lost work, had a bit of extra work, and still have no luck.

The social aspect of studying

The social aspect of studying, whether positive or negative, was a common theme raised. Several students noted a sense of camaraderie that had risen from a shared sense of purpose:

Cody - we're all trying to achieve the same goal... I can't let the team down now.

The level of social integration in a higher education setting can influence the student's success. When students wrote about their experiences in the first year of tertiary education, the connections they made with classmates and teaching staff was deemed the most important contributor to a positive learning environment (Donahue, 2004).

Interviewer - What have you liked the best?

Bernie - Probably engaging with other people.

Morgan [The lecturer] told us all to calm down and that it's not as scary as what it seems and then basically got us talking to the people around us, which was a lot more comfortable from then on.

The sense of camaraderie does not appear to be dimmed by the recognition from students that they might not like, or be liked, by their classmates. For example, Cassidy said, "*I'm a really friendly person so I start talking to people so I made friends and it was okay*" but followed that up later with:

Cassidy - Well, I would really like [university] to have more enthusiasm from students. It's a really negative thing that other students don't turn up or they're like, 'I can't be bothered.' Then don't apply. Please, other people are trying to learn.

Cassidy's comment is also an example of how many students felt they were different from their classmates. They were working together as a team to achieve a specific goal, but beyond that, they did not necessarily feel that they had a great deal in common.

Bailey - most of these people here still live at home...these kids have only just gotten out of school, and at their age I'd been working for four years.

Students persisting in the course at the time of the interviews seemed

to regard themselves as survivors; they were more determined than others to complete the program. They also acknowledged that life circumstances can impede study.

Morgan - I think it's just the stress deters them and ... outside commitments and complications sort of thing ... they're unable to balance the worries of being able to do both.

Bean and Metzner (1985) argued that social interactions might be less important to non-traditional students than they are assumed to be to traditional students. This could be because non-traditional students want more practical and utilitarian outcomes, rather than social. This research suggests that social integration was certainly important to the bridging program students, similar to the first year students interviewed by Donahue (2004).

Social integration refers not only to peer relationships, but also to relationships with teachers and support staff. Students see themselves as consumers, and expect to develop learning relationships with lecturers and tutors (Ballantyne, 2012).

Student-teacher relationships

Student-teacher interactions are “one of the most important characteristics of high quality learning” (Australian Council for Educational Research 2008:14) and students taking bridging courses have frequently had negative educational experiences in the past, and those experiences could relate to teaching staff.

Bailey - I've had bad experiences with teachers who failed me ... I could have shown in class I'm quite capable of doing [the work] and they've still failed me for it.

The students in this program were critical of teaching practices that they felt were a hindrance to their learning. Negative feedback from teachers had an impact on their confidence.

Kerry - I found ... that our tutor had too high expectations for [bridging program] students... you know, like it disheartened me, it really, really did. It put me down so bad, I was kind of thinking like, 'well...why?' It kind of made me feel like I wasn't good enough ...

Self-efficacy is a fluid concept, which can be influenced positively or

negatively by the comments (even indirect comments) of others (Wilson, 2012). Our research supports the findings of Wilson noting that when students received supportive or encouraging comments or feedback from lecturers and other staff, they were encouraged to continue.

Jamie - Our maths teacher... he just goes to extreme lengths just to help you out and to make sure you feel comfortable with it.

There was significant recognition for the work of the Academic Skills Advisor who provides both onsite academic support, and help by email.

Bailey - But now that I've got [academic skills advisor]'s email, if I have any queries I just send it off to him and he just gives me a thing back with what I could do better and corrects me on my punctuation and highlights it and all that sort of stuff.

Alex lamented that support and additional help was provided inconsistently:

Alex - One thing I don't like that I think could change is ... some ... give you as much as you want to know [about] an assignment but then there's teachers that kind of say no... you have to learn this and this is the way you have to do it – I can't give you anything.

Recognition of the importance of the connections made with faculty staff (Donahue, 2004) emphasises the positive benefits of a teaching environment that can support students to overcome their challenges.

Challenges to study

Challenges to studying were often personal issues. Bernie discussed raising three young children as a single parent, and Cassidy talked about a potential crisis when her day care arrangements failed. Kerry hoped to pre-empt such issues by carefully balancing her study schedule around her family responsibilities.

Several students complained that it was sometimes hard to continue because they found the material boring, or they were unenthusiastic about going to class. Bernie admitted to struggling with academic writing because she found it dull. Cody wished that he had the same enthusiasm for studying as he did for skateboarding, and Bailey made a similar comment about motorcycle riding, whilst also complaining about the early morning starts. Morgan lamented that there was too much

time spent sitting and listening in a classroom rather than moving about doing things.

Analysis

In phenomenography, the interview transcripts are first analysed individually to determine the aspects of the experience upon which the participants focus – these are the structural aspects. The structural aspects are then considered as a whole to compare and contrast the differences in experiences as described by the interviewees. These final categories are known as the outcome space. We recognised that although the participants focussed on the same four aspects of the experience as described previously, their descriptions of those aspects differed based on the apparent attitude and focus of the students toward the overall program. We identified that that the students experienced the program in one of three ways, which we named Stairway, Doorway and Hallway (SDH).

Table 2 summarises how we used the structural aspects of the experience to create the outcome space and to develop the SDH model. The categories are less distinct than they are developmental, in that a higher category may encompass the descriptors of the lower categories.

Table 2: *Structural aspects of the experience mapped to the thematic categories*

| | Stairway | Doorway | Hallway |
|-----------------------------------|---|---|---|
| Motivation | Avoid unemployment Gain entry to undergraduate study. | Gain entry to undergraduate study. Gain self-confidence for undergraduate study. | Learn new skills for undergraduate study. Be a role model for children. |
| Social aspects of study | Tolerant of classmates | Mostly positive social experience Recognition of joint purposes. | Recognition of importance of teamwork. Positive social experience includes teaching staff. |
| Staff/Student Interactions | Doubts ability of teachers. Disheartened by negative feedback. | Accepts help offered. | Seeks additional help. |

| | | | |
|----------------------------|---|--|---|
| Challenges to study | Doubts need for content or structure of courses. Boring, other things to do. | Self-confidence Family responsibilities | Mentions challenges and how they were overcome. |
|----------------------------|---|--|---|

To illustrate, all students have some experiences that equate to the Stairway, the challenges of study that must be overcome, and for some, that is the entire experience. Many students see the challenges as secondary to the anticipated reward of entry to an undergraduate program – the Doorway. Some students see both the difficulties of study and the entry to their preferred undergraduate program as less important than their personal and academic accomplishments throughout the program, and this experience is the Hallway.

It is noted that the physical environment of the university was not prominent as an influencer of the student experience. Wyatt (2011) found that although non-traditional students valued the facilities and pleasant surroundings on campus, it was less important than the intangible aspects of the experience.

Stairway

Four students perceived the bridging program as a Stairway. The analogy of a staircase implies that students see the program as a difficult climb or an unpleasant task that they must complete in order to move forward. The language indicated that they needed the bridging program to progress to undergraduate study. They described the courses as difficult, boring or challenging. The reasons for selecting the program often related to extrinsic motivations, where university study is a potential solution to an external problem such as unemployment.

Cody - It's just I don't have a lot of motivation for any of this.

Stairway students focus on the rank that they need to achieve to enter their chosen undergraduate degree:

Bernie - I'm basically doing the [courses] that I need to get in.

Whilst all participants were generally tolerant of classmates, Stairway students did not see the value in working together, or see similarities in their situations. Bailey commented that he had no particular interest in classmates. Alex characterised the class as “a zoo”, where some people

were the “sloths” (lazy) and others were the “giraffes with their heads in the clouds”. Bean and Metzner (1985) identified non-traditional students as focused less on the social outcomes of study and more on utilitarian outcomes, and this Stairway category reflects that attitude.

Students in this category often characterised their teachers as having unrealistic expectations of students, at this level of study. As previously mentioned, Kerry felt that her tutor had overly high expectations, and other students mentioned that they were particularly disheartened by negative feedback.

Jamie - When someone says you've screwed up, you've failed ... and stuff like that. ... it tends to dent your confidence for your future and that's what I felt like.

Sometimes, external factors in a student's life meant that the Stairway experience was forced upon them:

Bernie – Um ... yeah, well I've had a major thing going on in my life as well. I've had a custody battle and I've had to deal with that in the middle of this and manage my three children all around study as well.

The Stairway experience reflects Bowl's (2010:142) assertion that non-traditional students often view university study as “initially, at any rate ... a struggle for personal, academic, financial and emotional survival”.

Doorway

In the second category of description, the Doorway, students see the bridging program as an opportunity to improve their life chances by allowing them entry to university study. Whilst the four students in this classification often mentioned the difficulties involved in study, the overall focus was on the entry to an undergraduate program rather than on the difficult journey.

Morgan - Overall I think the course has been beneficial so far like I can see why they set so many tasks and why it would be used in degrees and everything like I do see the relevance it's just sometimes they're a bit hard and you don't want to do them.

These students generally displayed a confidence that they would finish the program and gain entry to further study.

Interviewer: *And have you had any times during this last nine, ten weeks where you've thought you maybe wouldn't be able to continue?*

Alex: *No.*

Interviewer: *Never?*

Alex: *No.*

Doorway students largely spoke of their classmates in positive terms, noting a shared purpose, or recognition of the benefits of having companions in study.

Alex - a lot of the people ... didn't finish anything, ... so I think that's why I relate to them ... they want to better themselves and get into an undergraduate degree which is exactly ... what I want to do so we're working together to achieve...

Or, in simpler terms:

Cody: We're all trying to achieve the same goal.

Even Bailey, who was generally ambivalent about his classmates, acknowledged the benefits of collaboration:

Bailey: In the start, it was hard but then I spoke to other people and I realised it's not really that hard, it's just confusing.

Bean and Metzner (1985) and more recently, Jackling and Natoli (2011) reviewed a number of studies and concluded that social integration at university is positively related to persistence. The potential benefits are there even when the social interactions are only related to class discussions, group work or other academic issues (Wyatt, 2011).

Students can have contrasting experiences which can be seen in the responses to the question "How do you know what is expected from you?" Both of the following answers point to the assessment task sheet, which includes a marking rubric, as a source of information. Alex explains how the teachers use the task sheet, while Cody defines the task sheet more as a tool for students.

Alex: Um we have task sheets...and the marking rubric. But the tutors are really good and they'll go through the marking rubric with you and pretty much tell you what you have to do and what's

expected ... which is ... good in some ways I guess.

Cody - You're given a task sheet. Read off the task sheet first [to learn] what they expect from you. Read from that and just like work backwards from that.

Students in this category took advantage of extra help offered by teaching and administrative staff.

Alex: He does maths revision from nine 'til ten on a Tuesday morning. And he'll go over the week, anything I'm having trouble with, from the week before.

Cody: [Staff member] couldn't be nicer, she always helps me.

Doorway students still struggled with personal difficulties, making study challenging at times, however the adverse circumstances mentioned were more likely to be attributed to internal factors, such as self-confidence or family difficulties.

Cassidy: It's difficult when you have little kids but I really want to become a doctor.

This attitude toward the challenges of study was in contrast to Stairway students who saw the arduousness of study as related to the course itself. Aird et al. (2010) describe course-related difficulties as structural, and issues such as illness, family commitment and self-confidence as individual. Hence, the challenges expressed by Doorway students tended to be individual rather than structural. Similarly, Lisciandro and Gibbs (2016), in their longitudinal study of over 2000 students in an enabling program, reported that personal circumstances including health and family responsibilities were the primary reason for attrition in that program.

Hallway

Hallway students are those for whom the bridging program is life changing. They value the program for the learning they are doing, rather than for the grades alone. The analogy of a hallway illustrates that the students still need to climb the stairs (do the hard work of study) and enter through the doorway (into an undergraduate degree), but before they walk through the door they are passing through a long hallway that includes other doors, windows, photographs on both sides that represent opportunities for learning and self-improvement. The students in the Stairway and Doorway categories are so focused on the struggle, or on the

final destination, that they fail to notice opportunities along the way. This variation is seen in a similar program at another regional university: “The reality is that for some of our students, the STEPS program represents a ticket into university, rather than a life-changing experience” (McDougall & Davis, 2011:444). In our research, the Hallway students are those for whom the program was a life-changing experience.

Two students were classified into the Hallway category. In the interview, Cassidy did not talk about her grades or mention her required rank. Her initial goal was to “study a few subjects without going to university at all” and she was “here to learn” but she had found the experience so positive that she intended to continue onto studying medicine.

These students also mentioned that they expected their university study to have a positive influence on their children.

Kerry - My parents are excellent parents... but they never had degrees. So a lot of kids ..., it kind of opens up their eyes more to say, 'Hey you know my Mum's got a degree, I can too.' It's not like 'Mum just works in the servo, I'll just work in the servo too'. So I want my kids to grow up knowing that it is possible to do it...

The improved employment prospects that accompany a parent’s tertiary education increase the status and financial security of the entire family (Scott et al., 1996). A tertiary education is as transformative an experience for the offspring of adult students as it is for the students themselves (Wainwright & Marandet, 2010).

These students tended to report more positive social relationships with peers, including an understanding of the benefits of teamwork. They described constructive communications with teaching staff, and had the confidence to ask for help, rather than waiting for it to be offered.

Cassidy - It was easy for me to approach...the teachers

These students recognised relationships with both peers and university staff as an important influence of their learning experience. This reflects the findings of Donahue (2004) who asserted that these social connections were *the* most important factor in the creation of a positive learning environment.

The challenges described by the Hallway students were challenges they had faced and overcome, rather than persistent problems. Cassidy

described how she had solved a babysitting issue, and Kerry explained how her time management and organisational skills helped her to manage studying with two small children at home.

A comment from Cassidy, who was born overseas, effectively demonstrates the extent to which she saw the possibilities and opportunities afforded her by achieving a university degree:

Cassidy - Having kids doesn't stop you from learning, so that was really, really big thing for me... It's really wonderful. It means you are equal. You have kids, you're a mother, it doesn't matter. It's equal. So it really made me happy.

McDougall and Davis (2011) recognised the indirect benefits of study as transformative learning (including personal and emotional development), which are likely to be very similar to the Hallway students in this study; however, we are conscious that the sample size is too small to generalise to the population.

The SDH model demonstrates that students at the regional satellite campus experienced the bridging program in three distinctly different ways. Their attitudes toward, and experiences of the structural aspects of motivation, social relationships, teacher-student relationships and challenges created overall experiences that the students explained in their own words. They focused on the challenges, on the opportunity to enter a degree program, and on the multiple opportunities offered through learning. While it may seem desirable to encourage students toward a Hallway experience, it is important to remember that a student's appreciation of their learning experience is heavily influenced by their habitus, and that all of these experiences, in this case, led to a successful completion of the program.

Conclusions

The SDH model recognises that students experience the same program in a variety of ways, in this case as either a stairway, a doorway or a hallway. It offers an effective way of categorising and understanding the experiences of students completing a bridging program at a regional satellite university campus. The relational aspects of the experience as portrayed in the outcome space are dependent upon the structural aspects of the experience as this group of students described them.

It highlights that many aspects of the students' experience involved matters

outside the academic structure of the courses. While the university might successfully manage the pedagogical aspects of the program, issues such as student motivation and social integration are beyond the control of the education provider. Having teaching, administrative and support staff who are empathic and accepting of students' individual circumstances is an important factor in supporting students to successful completion.

Most importantly however, the model indicates that student success can manifest in a number of ways and be categorised accordingly. As much as it is possible to succeed in any of these three categories, it is also possible to surrender. It is tempting to assume that the students who did not complete the course failed to climb the stairway but this may not be the case. Some students may be perfectly capable of climbing the stairs, wandering up the hallway and reaching the door, but choose to cease the journey midway. Perhaps they saw the opportunities available in the hallway and took an alternative exit. Or, perhaps the doorway to an undergraduate qualification is not the only destination. What this research has been able to demonstrate is that to increase access to tertiary education, bridging programs and satellite campuses are only the beginning. Students will withdraw from study or succeed in study sometimes despite their circumstances. Future research could investigate the experiences of students who withdraw from the program to investigate how their experiences fit within the Stairway, Doorway and Hallway model.

Student motivation for study is varied ranging from something as simple as avoiding unemployment, to as complex as the notion of empowering their children. They did not need to make friends to complete their study, but they did like the fact that they were not alone. They wanted to respect and be respected by the teaching and administrative staff at the campus, and they wanted support and understanding when they were faced with challenges. Universities can widen access to study by offering tertiary bridging programs and by building satellite campuses in areas of need, but as educators we need to keep in mind that the success of our students is greatly dependent on their individual motivations and experiences. Student success is frequently out of our control but students still need our support to achieve their goals.

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