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Transition and attrition: a sociological investigation

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Abstract

Student transition to university is a milestone for most people seeking a higher education. The range of environments from which prospective students emerge to engage in study at university is as diverse as the student population. Yet the ideal of a 'seamless' transition to higher education is conditioned by mediating social, cultural, and political factors, in addition to those of an individual psychological and personal nature. The purpose of this paper is to elaborate on the sociological aspects of attrition, incorporating a social circumstance perspective that positions attrition as a response to particular political and social contexts and circumstances.

Introduction

Education in contemporary society offers the prospect of improved life chances and to act as a vehicle for social mobility. The social and policy shift to 'mass education' is evidence of the possibility of this prospect. Yet the contemporary social influences of the market economy; culture and class; institutional dynamics; and individualised, personal attributes all contribute to the complexity of transition and attrition debates.

The theoretical aim of this paper is to consider the sociological factors of influence interacting with the individual student and eventually determining instances of retention or withdrawal. The volatile variables in the state of society we call late modernity (Giddens, 1991: 243) are a focus for a critical appraisal of the structural and political dynamics influencing vocational education and training (VET) and higher education (HE). The practical purpose of this paper is to link the theory with some responses and results from a recent survey designed to elicit student intentions, preferences, difficulties and opinions within a Bachelor of Social Science (generic) degree course.

'Mass education' and attrition

The class concept of 'mass education' as it applies to the current phase of education reform offers some interesting possibilities for addressing attrition rates and transition issues. If mass education means increased opportunities, greater choice, flexibility of course delivery, and affordability then these must be considered positive moves in the right direction. There is no need to rehearse the arguments for accessible and relevant educational possibilities creating a more informed and inclusive society. Mass education is worthy of defence on these grounds alone. Yet increases in student

enrolment enabled by institutional and political reform does create some problematic issues. One problem concerns the balancing of educational quality with the student expectation of course choice and flexibility. Another problem is the difficulty of containing and reducing the attrition rate as higher education becomes more accessible for a differentiated student population.

In Australia, approximately one third of all students entering university fail to graduate, and approximately half of those who withdraw do so in their first year (Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 2000). This phenomenon provides the impetus for continuing transition research measuring the extent and scope of transition problems in the first year of study of higher education (See McInnis and James, 1995; Pargetter, McInnis, James, Evans, Peel, and Dobson, 1998; McInnis, Hartley, Polesel, and Teese, 2000) In analysing attrition, it should be pointed out that non-completion is not necessarily negative for students (Tinto 1993), with a high proportion of withdrawers returning to higher education; changing their goals; transferring between courses or institutions; or joining the workforce (Yorke, 1998).

However, the converse side of attrition is that if the greater majority of attrition led to withdrawal from courses with no plan or desire to pursue studies, then this should be a sign of alarm that something is structurally wrong. In order to have a clear understanding of this phenomenon, comparative statistics may provide some insight.

For 2002, the attrition rate for all domestic students was 18.5% and for international students, 17.7%, for both groups the lowest since 1994 (DEST, 2004). The group for whom the attrition rate appears the greatest are students over the age of 20 years and whether the student was new to higher education or not (ibid.). The crude average attrition rate for all domestic students at Queensland University of Technology from 1994 to 2002 inclusive is 17.9% mean (ibid.). This compares with a national average of 19%.

Using different terminology to describe different aspects of student movement may be helpful to clarifying the process. The terminology of retention rather than attrition could be re-framed as an institutional performance indicator with persistence a measurable indicator of individual performance (Levitz, Noel, and Richter, 1999: 31). Attrition as the flip side of retention has consequences for the student as well as for the image and finances of the university (ibid.: 32). Levitz et al maintain that on average, more selective institutions experience lower attrition rates than do less selective institutions with a 37 per cent difference in drop-out rates (ibid.: 34). Levitz et al use North American data but interesting comparisons could be made with Australian data using private universities as the equivalent 'highly selective' American context. For example, it could be hypothesised that full fee-paying students are much less likely to withdraw due to commitment, incentives and motivation linked to financial considerations, particularly for full fee-paying international students. This provides further cause for considering attrition rates when linked to more readily available courses with public or institutional subsidies. Is it the case of too much choice and flexibility, with little or no financial penalties that contribute to a steady attrition rate? Or have recent educational reforms made it harder for school leavers from all but the most financially disadvantaged backgrounds to gain access to financial assistance while studying? (Birrell, Dobson, Rapson and Smith, 2003: 1). In

this section attrition has been discussed in a number of contexts. Whilst there will be references to these approaches the following focus will be on a sociological approach.

The individualisation of attrition

Using a sociological perspective for an alternative analysis of student attrition, a re-interpretation of Durkheim's (1951) concepts of social facts and social cohesiveness is instructive. As an alternative to a psychological approach, Durkheim proposed a social circumstance perspective and that by adapting this theoretical stance, attrition could be seen as a response to particular social contexts and circumstances. Advancing the emphasis on structural and societal factors conditioning aspects of attrition, however, is to bracket out a considerable psychological literature that necessarily embraces personal characteristics affecting the individual requiring some form of institutional intervention or personal management.

Levitz and Hovland (1998) list personal, social, academic, life issues, and institutional issues as categories of issues ultimately impacting on the decision to withdraw. Except for institutional issues, all of the above categories place the individual student as "lacking the independence, skill, and savvy of students in years past" (Levitz, Noel, and Richter, 1999: 40). This has the potential for an 'industry' based on a remedial and training focus on 'making' a successful graduate and also contributes to a considerable literature based on personal attributes and their relation to attrition. Yet attrition is brought about by an interaction of the educational institution's societal pressures and the particular pre-entry student values, academic intentions, and commitment to the educational process (Brunsden & Davies, Shevlin and Bracken, 2000: 301). These interrelated factors suggest a social influence orientation in partially explaining attrition. And as briefly mentioned above, social change influenced by institutional reform creates new opportunities while not necessarily slowing or containing student attrition.

Cultural and class aspects of attrition

Influenced by Tinto (1975), Brunsden et al. describe a model placing a student's decision to persist or dropout being initially influenced by their pre-enrolment characteristics, background variables, and commitment levels, which are then attenuated by their integration into the social and academic spheres of the institution. For some students, entering, remaining and persisting in HE or VET, is dependent on cultural and social class factors. While there has been a move from an elite, to a mass system of higher education, the current evidence suggests that the share of university enrolments for disadvantaged Australians has not improved greatly over the last decade (Phillips Curran, 2003: 4). The ability of students' capacity to pay up front, to repay accumulated Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) debts, and the rate of HECS deferral (79% in 2001) all contribute to complicating the higher education experience for many Australians. When age related attrition is introduced into the equation it presents a compounding dynamic. In the category of what Brunsden et al would classify as background variables, issues such as social isolation, parenting and care-giver considerations, and socioeconomic background are important in contextualising mature-age attrition.

More students are now working part-time to cover expenses, and the average hours worked has increased. Longer working hours are strongly linked to increased drop out rates. Course and university choice are dependent on financial considerations and “disadvantaged groups are more debt averse, even when loan repayments are income contingent” (Phillips Curran, 2003: 5). Birrell et al (2003: 2) propose tighter rules for access to student financial assistance that include a) the virtual capping of Commonwealth-subsidised HECS undergraduate places in Australian universities since the mid-1990s; and b) increases in HECS fees, thus adding to long-term student debt. These reforms effectively prevent entry for some students while others “appear to be delaying entry to full-time courses until they earn the required income to be assessed as Independent” (ibid.: 2). Coupled with age-related family and employment factors, and availability of accessible education institutions, some groups are less able than others to access higher education. Education institutional types (older and more prestigious, and suburban multi campus) and campus geographic and demographic location also influences both academic entry and accessibility in terms of proximity. Furthermore, disadvantaged students, particularly those who did enrol in more prestigious courses, could feel at odds with their new environment and have trouble fitting in at their chosen institution (Furlong and Forsyth, 2003). This culture barrier is no doubt an influential factor for those perceived as ‘outsiders’ or ‘different’ relative to the majority. Disadvantaged students are also more likely to follow complicated pathways in their pursuit of higher education, including deferred enrolment, gap years and switching, repeating or restarting their courses for non-academic reasons (ibid.). Yet the endorsement of a meritocratic model of education assumes that success should be measured on the basis of achieved rather than ascribed qualities such as social class, family connections, gender, race, or other irrelevant attributes (Lynch and O’Riordan, 1998: 499). Equality is deemed to be promoted if social-class inequalities/advantages in education are proportionately distributed across different classes; the closer the participation or success ratio is to one, the greater the equality achieved. Equality of access, however, raises additional responsibilities for support for, and understanding of, the underlying issues and dynamics associated with disadvantaged students.

Structural issues and attrition

By adopting a broad structuralist approach, structures are fundamentally conceived as dynamic entities working in and through collective and individual agents. By identifying the relevant contexts and partners to education decisions at the structural level, it is possible to locate strategies for action and change. Barriers to entry and retention in higher education including persistent inequality invariably point to economic issues as an over-riding obstacle in terms of equality of access and participation (Lynch and O’Riordan, 1998: 454). The gap between relative socioeconomic advantage and disadvantage is more pronounced now than ever before. The structural conditions perpetuating inequality continue within the education reform process, despite a general increase in the economic wealth of the nation. Within a distributive model of social justice, there is much to add to the notion of a fair society in terms of not only entering into the HE sector, but remaining and succeeding. Persistence and retention depend on overcoming the underlying issues related to aspects of the reform process, and in alleviating persistent socioeconomic disadvantage. This is most apparent for Indigenous Australians when considering the degree of under representation in the higher education sector.

In 2000, Indigenous students made up 1.2% of the total student population, with females accounting for 64% of Indigenous students (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002). Hunter (1999) notes that: “In assessing the extent of indigenous poverty, the diversity of Indigenous circumstances, and the dominance of alternative value systems, must be recognised” (1999: 1). Any discussions of changes in Indigenous poverty must recognise emerging Indigenous priorities, as increasingly articulated by Indigenous people themselves (ibid.: 2).

However, remedial methodologies are required to adequately account for the major contemporary societal influences of market economy driven reform, particularly educational reform. Tinto’s (1993) student integration model rightly sees the institution as a social system, with successful student integration linked to the value patterns of the college and the “sufficiency of interaction with others in the college” (McInnis, Hartley, Polesel and Teese, 2000: 17). This process could be true of most situations where new social and institutional structures require ‘probationary’ periods of adjustment. Yet this model does not engage with the larger social structures that influence both the student and the university or college. It is suggested instead that institutional reform and the subtle political and economic influence of the current neoliberal paradigm exerts coercive pressures on learning institutions to embrace a range of ‘competitiveness’ strategies to bring the education sector into line with other public sector reforms (Robertson and Dale, 2002: 463). In addition to the many strategies in place to successfully ‘enrol’ the student into a university habitus, an equally important aspect of student and university success is in understanding the relation between student and university performance, and with reform and restructuring. The themes already canvassed suggest neoliberal driven reform re-creates particular economic difficulties for some students and some higher education institutions. A summary of the influences neoliberal reforms exert on stakeholders is outlined in the next section.

The neoliberal connection

The Australian state has sought to promote a state of permanent innovation and flexibility both in its citizens and workers and in firms and organisations, in order to strengthen structural competitiveness through intervening on the supply (rather than the demand) side (Robertson and Dale, 2002: 467). The social institution of education is a site of neoliberal discourse and practices, in that the state must intervene more strongly to ensure compliance with economic competitiveness and market-based modes of coordination (ibid.: 464). The range of ‘competitive strategies include devolution of school governance, school markets, entrepreneurialism, international testing, language and literacy directed at trade, auditing standards, and exporting education (ibid.). Moreover, the general neoliberal project encourages individual actors to become self-regulating subjects while simultaneously being constituted within relations of control and embedded within systems of knowledge and discourse (Callero, 2003: 118). In common with other neoliberal regimes a core ‘disciplinary’ function is to make and remake subjects who are “expected to serve as partners in the innovative, knowledge-driven entrepreneurial, flexible economy and its accompanying self-reliant empowered workfare regime” (Jessop, 1999: 355-6). It is this core aspect of neoliberalism that privileges the self, as entrepreneur, as responsible for both creating and participating in productive activity. The ‘self’, then,

becomes a reflexive process of social interaction which refers to the uniquely human capacity to become an object to one's self, to be both subject and object emerging from the social experience (Callero, 2003: 119). Conceptually, the student becomes enmeshed with the university, with the mutual success of each depending on, and contributing to, the overall success of the institution as a whole. Yet this dialectic also interpenetrates with the dominant social, political, and economic paradigms of influence creating a complicated variable matrix.

Put simply, individual actors are reflexively drawn into the dominant societal discourse allowing for agency, creative action, and the possibility of resistance. Understanding the collectively constituted conceptions of the public self, the means by which these conceptions are produced, and the disciplinary techniques of power that are deployed in the process are, as Cahill (1998) notes, corrective approaches to social constructivism that tend to psychologize the subject. From this brief and simplified overview of the relation between neoliberal governance and the 'self', two important points emerge. Firstly, to be actively aware of the economic and political nuances of restructuring and reform is essential as a preliminary point of reference for all stakeholders in the education process. Secondly, the opportunity for resistance exists at all levels of intervention provided transparency of motives is apparent at all levels.

Leaving structural and socioeconomic factors, and focussing on the more tangible issues of already enrolled students, a case study will be discussed in the next section. This will shed some light on how the current approach could be enriched and to some extent reduce the attrition rate.

Student survey summary of selected results N = 46 (35 females and 11 males).

A questionnaire survey instrument was administered to a group of new and continuing students enrolled in a generic Social Science undergraduate degree at Queensland University of Technology, Carseldine Campus, in May 2004. The aim of the survey was to determine themes influencing choice of course, intentions to remain in, or move out of the course, difficulties experienced, and suggestions for improvement. The researchers were interested to know what personal, institutional, and social factors and influences determined student progression through this course. Of interest and relevance to this paper, student responses to the following questions are discussed.

Q6. Was your first preference the Social Science Course?

Q7. What is your current intention and plan?

Q8. Please explain the reasons for your intention

These questions test the strength of attachment or commitment to an initial course choice and indicate future commitment intentions.

48% of females and 15% of males made their current course a first choice decision, made up of 44% full-time and 20% part-time students, meaning 37% of students not choosing their current course as first choice.

35% of students aged 25+ made a first choice preference, while 15% of those in the 21-24, and 13% of students in the 17-20 age groups, made first choice preferences. 26% of those in the 17-20 age group did not choose their current course as first choice.

61% of students intended to continue their current programme, with 15% intending to up-grade to another course within the university. 20% of students were undecided. 41% of full-time and 20% of part-time students intended to continue the programme. This equates to 61% of students intending to continue, or 76% when including those intending to continue but upgrading to another course within the university. Reasons for continuing were grouped around themes of employment, completion, interest, and future study, with course interest being the dominant theme mentioned. For those undecided, course uncertainty and employment commitments were of concern.

Q13. Have you been experiencing any of the following difficulties? 1) Personal problems; 2) Family problems; 3) Problems with assignments, tests and tutorials; 4) Social isolation; and 5) Other problems.

Q14. Please explain why and what could be done (in relation to the difficulties).

17% of females and 6% of males experienced personal difficulties and 13% of females only, experienced family difficulties. The highest frequency of personal difficulties (6) was experienced by the 25+ age group as were family problems (5). Assignments, tests and tutorials were a source of difficulty for 15% of females and 9% of males. Social isolation affected 7% of females and 7% of males, with other problems (not stated) creating difficulties for 4% of females and 4% of males.

Employment and study conflict, followed by economic disadvantage, single parent, and personal relationship issues were the main themes in relation to difficulties experienced.

These data indicate the contingent nature of the student experience and their flexible orientation to choice and future study intentions. Older, full-time female students appeared more decisive on course choice and intention to complete yet also complained of economic and single parent status difficulties. For the overall student sample, this group would appear vulnerable to external factors with consequent disruptions to their study programme.

If we generalise the findings of this group, a larger number of students may face personal, family, academic, and social problems. In order to reduce attrition rates, it is vital to address these issues and provide sufficient support. It is also important to encourage and enhance the social cohesiveness of the student body by developing and initiating practical attrition reducing strategies. These could be in the form of collective activities and participation, perhaps in the form of unit or course associated activities such as sporting activities, alternative cultural arts and culture appreciation, or constructing active peer support networks.

Conclusion

The theoretical and empirical issues and data discussed above are by no means fully developed, yet the aim was to indicate the problematic relation between the student, university and dominant social and political structures. The issue of student transition has been theorized as a multiple problem consisting of numerous actors, institutions, processes and networks of power relations. On the one hand the issue of non-completion, attrition and transition is problematic for students, the university, other community stakeholders and the government. The issue of socioeconomic disadvantage, age, and gender related factors appear as predictors of access equity and

completion probability. On the other hand it was shown that institutional and social change maintains an uncertain social environment, with the problem of attrition being a corollary of neoliberal reform and restructuring.

Universities have become sites of responsibility and risk, with safety nets and warning systems. They consist of local networks and partnerships defined by the state's discursive construction. The neoliberal state seeks to govern at distance, through local community networks alerted by risk indicators. The 'problem' of student attrition is both a risk indicator in the larger institutional scheme of managing and administering an 'at risk' situation and an indicator of particular 'at risk' student groups.

Student attrition leads to questioning the structural problems endemic in capitalist economies that have been intensified within a market-based system of education provision. One approach for remedial action rests on balancing the new regimes of marketing, image, performance, and auditing, with a critical understanding of how these processes influence relations with and between the various stakeholders. Attrition therefore might be linked to both the wider social and economic problems arising from the social structure and the consequence of the market and as a process embedded within neoliberal discursive practices. However, considering this analysis, there is still space for university authorities to engage with the problems and some of the strategies mentioned in the case study. This paper is a preliminary step in the partial solution to understanding student attrition, and invites the inclusion of the underlying issues of attrition as factors when considering transition strategies.

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