What to study? Supporting prospective student enrolment choice

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Abstract

Research has shown that university students often withdraw in their first year due to a change in career direction, enrolment in an unsuitable program of study or in a program not relevant to career goals. This paper describes work in progress to research the support needed by prospective students to help them determine what to study at university as it hypothesises that existing support services do not fully respond to the needs of prospective students in this regard. It will therefore explore the ways in which Year 12 students make decisions about what to study at university, and how universities, high schools and government organisations engage with prospective students. Knowledge gained from this study will enrich our understanding of the prospective student experience and support the establishment of a framework for tertiary institutions to use to design student development strategies for prospective students.

Introduction

Choosing what to study at university is a major decision that significantly impacts a student's future. A poor choice can lead to dis-satisfaction, lack of engagement and ultimately withdrawal from university study. But what support do students actually get at critical times to assist them to make this choice? And how can the university sector better support students and secondary schools to enable students to make better choices?

Student attrition from university study results in significant costs to institutions, government and society, as well as to the individual students who leave (Simpson, 2005). The reasons why students withdraw from studies during their first year are complex. However, retention research in the field of Higher Education points to enrolment in an unsuitable program of study, study that is not relevant to career goals, and a change of direction, as common reasons for withdrawing from university (James, Krause & Jennings, 2010; Long, Ferrier & Heagney, 2006; Simpson, 2004). Findings from a recent Australian study of prospective students have indicated that "many students who aspire to get a university degree do not know what degree they want to study" (Gale et al., 2013, p. 6). Students who have not made informed choices about what they want to study are more likely to enrol in a program that is not meaningful to them and thus end up withdrawing – or they may not enrol at all.

University outreach programs tend to support primary and secondary students to determine *whether to study*. University recruitment activities are predominantly focussed on helping students to decide *where to study,* with a competitive thrust that aligns with a marketing culture and a consumer behaviour perspective. In the Australian context, application and admissions services are centralised by state, and serve an administrative function that is largely disconnected from the personal experience of prospective students. The missing link at present

is an understanding of the ways in which prospective students decide *what to study*, and how they are supported as they make this important decision.

Student enrolment choice – research to date

Research that attempts to explain the process undertaken by prospective high school students as they make decisions about university enrolment largely derives from US 'College Choice' studies. More aptly termed 'student enrolment choice' herein, to better fit the context of other countries, Hossler and Gallagher's model (1987) offers a widely-used and helpful description of the decision-making behaviour of prospective university students. The model describes the process in three phases: Predisposition (Years 7-9), Search (Years 10-12), and Select (Years 11-12) (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Predisposition refers to the phase during which a student establishes whether to attend education beyond secondary school. The Search phase describes
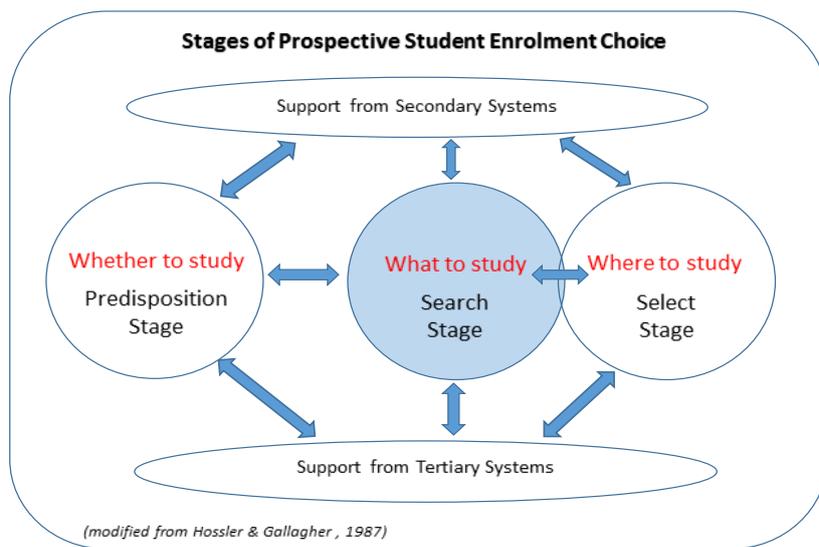

Figure 1: Stages of Student Enrolment

the period during which a prospective student seeks and explores information about educational options, and gathers information from tertiary institutions (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). It is believed that during this phase students decide upon a set of institutions from which to refine their selection. The Select stage is essentially the final selection of, and enrolment in an institution. The research will use this model, but will examine the process through the following three interfaces: Whether to study, What to study, and Where to study (Fig. 1) but with an explicit focus on *What to study*.

Whether to Study

Widening Participation (WP) is an approach to addressing Australian targets set to increase the intake of students from underrepresented populations in higher education to 20% by 2020 (Australian Government, 2008, p. xviii). Outreach initiatives are one of the ways in which the tertiary sector has responded to the equity agenda in Australia and have been largely developed to encourage young people to decide whether to study at university (Gale et al. 2013, Gale & Parker, 2013), and to foster aspirations to higher education. By connecting universities with primary and secondary schools, this systemic approach strives to build aspiration and enhance the cultural capital of, for example, students from a low-socioeconomic status background. This approach is far more involved than merely guiding prospective students to tertiary study. The broader concept of participation in higher education as a 'choice' has been considered to be "tied into discourses of meritocracy in which the right to higher education is understood in

terms of individual ability, potential and hard work rather than as shaped by structural, cultural and institutional inequalities and misrecognitions" (Burke, 2013, p. 110).

The WP perspective that drives outreach activities aligns conceptually with the first phase – predisposition – of the student enrolment choice model described by Hossler and Gallagher (1987). The timing of outreach initiatives is positioned to provide early interventions, before Year 11 and 12 (Gale et al., 2010). Studies that have examined the prospective student experience during this phase have evaluated the effectiveness of outreach programs (Gale et al., 2010), the role of background characteristics on aspiration (Homel & Ryan, 2014), and the exploration of the nature of aspiration (Gale et al., 2013), primarily within an equity context. Conceivably, the most recent efforts to widen participation are still new, and the "long term effects are yet to be established" (Gale & Parker, 2013, p. 54). The significance of a relationship between student enrolment choice behaviour and WP is not evidenced in the Australian research, but it is important to note that WP and enrolment choice similarly recognise the influence of student background characteristics on accessing higher education. The WP movement has however, provided an impetus for re-examining the ways in which the tertiary sector engages with prospective students in Australia, and has produced new research and knowledge about prospective students. But research to date has less significantly addressed the second –search – phase of the student enrolment choice process described by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) that concerns more distinctly "*what* to study." Once a prospective student determines *whether* to study, determining *what* to study is the next stage in realising aspirations to higher education.

What to Study

The search phase is the stage in which prospective students gather information about tertiary institutions (Bergerson, 2009), and investigate educational options (Diamond et al. 2012; Hossler et al., 1999; James, Baldwin & McInnes, 1999). Program choice (or what to study) overlaps slightly with institutional choice (James et al., 1999; Maringe, 2006), as reflected in Figure 1. However, there is merit in considering program choice as a distinct aspect within the process. Personal interest in an area of study is a factor that influences enrolment decisions, particularly as it relates to a meaningful career (James et al., 1999). More recent research indicates that many students choose to attend university based on career/job objectives (Scutter, Palmer, Luzeckyj, Burke da Silva, & Brinkworth, 2011, p. 16). Data from the longitudinal Australian First-Year Experience study shows that 26% of enrolled students are not ready to choose a program of study (James et al., 2010). An enrolment decision is typically only made once, and prospective students are not able to employ any experience in the process (Diamond et al., 2012), nor are they particularly well-informed as they make decisions about higher education (Szekeres, 2010).

Secondary Sector support

Guidance counsellors in secondary schools commonly have a responsibility for personal and educational guidance but this can down-grade the importance of career development as it relates to "help with occupational choice and longer-term career planning" (Sweet et al., 2010, p. 19). A weakness of this well-established paradigm is the sheer volume of students that guidance counsellors are required to support. Ratios of school counsellors to students in Australia are well above 1:500 (Australian Guidance Counsellors Association, 2013). Criticism of the quality of career development learning and advice in the Australian system considers that "many students have been given advice which is little more than personal opinion with all of the consequent biases" (Tatham & McIlveen, 2009, p. 4). There is also evidence that

negative outcomes can be associated with the "absence of college-related expertise among teachers beyond their personal experiences" (Perna, 2006, p. 142).

Tertiary Sector Support

Universities have developed various retention strategies *post*-enrolment by promoting engagement amongst students. Yet it is *prior* to enrolment that students "struggle to find out what they really want and what would be suitable for them" (Holmegaard, Ulriksen, & Madsen, 2014, p. 36). Research has noted a need for more personalised interaction with prospective students (Leach & Zepke, 2005) and has recommended that universities accompany information with "additional guidance on its interpretation and navigation" (Diamond et al., 2012, p. 10). Universities could take on a stronger role in "helping students to clarify their personal objectives for undertaking higher education and improving the matching of the interests and aptitude of students to particular fields of study" (James et al., 2010, p. 6), and to build capacity to navigate and use information in a useful way (Gale et al. 2010).

Summary of research to date

Student enrolment choice research serves to inform universities and other agencies interested in the behaviours of prospective students and what influences those behaviours. In Australia, these concepts are considered in the literature (Ali & Miller, 2007; Harden et al., 2014; James et al., 1999; James, 2000; Jung, 2013a; Jung, 2013b; Szekeres, 2010) but there is very little indication of how this is applied to current Australian practice. With only one major study conducted nearly 15 years ago (James et al., 1999), Australian research has neither refined nor created a more suitable approach to understanding the broad phenomenon of student enrolment choice. New knowledge about how prospective students determine what to study and how they are supported, particularly in an era of ubiquitous internet and social media use by the prospective student generation, would be a significant contribution to this field and would support the realisation of their higher education aspirations.

Methodology

This is a mixed methods study that is using a staged approach to examine the experience of prospective students and their interaction with the support structures available to them. At present, a review of current practice is being conducted of the existing systems and structures that support prospective students in South Australia. This involves a review of the three universities in SA, a selection of secondary schools, and an examination of relevant programs administered by federal and SA government organisations to determine how these agencies engage with, and provide services to, prospective students. Next, the study will explore the ways in which Year 12 secondary school prospective students in SA experience the process of determining what to study at university, and particularly how they engage with universities and their secondary school as they make enrolment decisions. And finally, an analysis and discussion of the data will be undertaken in order to develop a theoretical and developmental framework for improved support for prospective students. Whilst the findings of the research will be applicable nationwide, the study is being undertaken within SA because it provides an efficient, single education system to study since it involves a smaller populace, has limited university participants and is largely concentrated within a single city.

Significance of the research

The research will result in the development of a conceptual framework for the design of future recruitment activities, as well as a process model which could be adopted by Australian tertiary institutions to support all categories of prospective students. It is expected that this research can contribute to the knowledge used to inform government and institutional policy, and enrich the body of knowledge referred to by the tertiary sector. It will be relevant for outreach, recruitment/marketing, and admission practitioners, learning and teaching advocates, and administrators in higher education. A more specific understanding of the prospective student experience will also be helpful for both secondary school and career development professionals involved with students and families as they make decisions about higher education.

Questions

1. How does your university provide support to prospective students?
2. What is the nature of this support (is a particular theoretical foundation used?)
3. To which phases of the enrolment choice process do each of your university's recruitment/widening participation respond?
4. Describe the relationship between Retention, Teaching and Learning, and Recruitment at your university?
5. What evidence is there, or what measures does your university use, to determine whether activities for prospective students are successful? Are they related to enrolment rates or retention rates?

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