A tension in the student experience of higher education is between the enjoyment of independence, and the anxiety of freedom. This tension is played out in ways that impact on student academic retention, and on the broader experience that higher education promotes. The role of universities in understanding and responding to this tension is explored with reference to retention efforts. This leads to a discussion of the expectations a university can reasonably have in taking responsibility for the social and personal, as well as academic, development of students.

Among the many tensions at the heart of higher education (Karmel, 1990), there is the following. Universities offer students an environment of independence and freedom, which are highly appealing and desirable experiences, particularly for young people making the transition to an adult identity. At the same time however, these experiences are also cause for considerable anxiety. The renowned psychologist and founder of Gestalt Therapy, Fritz Perls, once defined anxiety as “excitement minus oxygen” (Perls, 1957). The excitement and opportunity offered by the relative freedom of University occurs within the context of a lack of provision of formal support structures such as have been experienced in secondary schooling, or informally in other social domains. As such, universities are as much arenas for anxiety as for the development of independence.

In this paper I explore some of the implications of this tension as it is played out in an area of recognised significance for universities - student “retention”. In what follows I introduce the concept of retention, and discuss its more recent use within higher education policy as a performance indicator. I then explore the tension between the push
to achieve high rates of retention, and the policy of providing broader, more equitable access to University, particularly for disadvantaged groups. I then examine topics relevant to the management of universities with respect to retention, including factors contributing to (or mitigating against) non-completion, the role of support services in relation to retention, and the impact of interventions aimed at transition to university (such as identifying and supporting “students at risk” early on in their courses). This sets the stage for examining the potential role of universities to contribute to students’ personal as well as intellectual and academic development, as part of the attributes fostered through a higher education experience. Throughout, I will try to maintain an eye of the tension between independence and anxiety as it relates to these domains.

Retention

The human capital approach to higher education in economic policy sees the success of economies in terms of the extent to which a labour force is educated (Yorke and Longden, 2004). In turn, the provision of university education is viewed as involving the “investment” of substantial public and private resources (Marks, 2007). This investment applies to all students once enrolled. Thus, there is a cost whether or not a student completes a course of study. The consequences of non-completion can be interpreted as a “waste” of investment in that the outcome has not been the conferring of a qualification. In short, governments invest, so they want a return, which translates into maximising the retention of students in courses, and course completion. From an institutional perspective, early withdrawal of students wastes the effort of recruiting and enrolling them, especially if fees are not collected (Yorke and Longden, 2004). From this it arises that it is important to better understand the factors associated with non-completion.

There is some controversy about how best to measure retention. Retention is hard to define once students move away from straightforward full-time engagement. Yorke and Longden (2004) argue for “success per study unit” as the best measure, proposing that this is student-centred, and promotes a lifelong learning perspective. Whatever measure is
used, retention has become a focus of increasing interest in the oversight and management of higher education. In the UK, Ministers responsible for higher education have been concerned to reduce non-completion (Yorke, 2000). In Australia, in 2005 the Commonwealth Government introduced a teaching and learning performance fund that rewarded universities based on their performance in three areas, including student satisfaction (55% of weighting), employment outcomes (22%), and retention (23%). Retention was gauged by the Government using two indicators:

- the commencing student progress rate, which measured first year student load passed as a proportion of load attempted each year; and
- the inversion of the commencing student attrition rate, which was the percentage of students enrolled in first year who complete that year or are retained in the subsequent year.

This is an example of the way the concept of retention has become bound into the increasing trend towards deploying quantifiable performance indicators in higher education policy.

Retention, Equity and Mass Higher Education Systems

At the same time as retention has emerged as a significant issue for governments and institutions in the administration and management of universities, the higher education sector in countries such as Australia have been subject to substantial increases in participation (Harman, 2003). This “massification” of higher education has again been driven by imperatives associated with increasing the skills of the labour force, as a dynamic associated with economic development. However, higher education has also been influenced by considerations of equity, on the basis that people from all sectors of society should have the opportunity to participate in higher education. At some point these forces merge, for as James (2007) has suggested, there is an argument that improving the participation of people from disadvantaged groups in higher education is
essential for long term social and economic integration of these groups, and that widening participation leads to a more cohesive and economically successful society.

However, massification and equity run into conflict with retention. For “with mass access, university students are more diverse in social background, intellectual preparation and expectations,” (James, 2000, p.100) This creates a challenge to provide higher education environments that meet a wide range of demands. With retention made important, it is conceivable that institutions might take the safe step of only enrolling students whose backgrounds point more strongly to student success (Yorke and Longden, 2004). So there are clear tensions between the retention and equity drivers.

In a recent study of the characteristics of completing and non-completing students in Australian universities, Marks (2007) identifies an expected completion rate for a first course of 71-74 per cent. Non-completion of university courses is much more likely among academically weaker students, with a student’s performance in the final years of secondary school remaining the best overall predictor of course completion in higher education. Nonetheless, high school performance is not a perfect proxy for the potential of individuals to thrive in and benefit from university study (James, 2007).

Further examination of these issues reveals other complexities. Increases in participation have resulted in increases in absolute completion rates. However, whilst there are more students in total from disadvantaged backgrounds, their proportion of the overall student population has remained fairly static (Harman, 2003). In addition, James (2007, p.11) has argued that “there is some truth that widening participation will lower retention and completion rates, but the drop is unlikely to be dramatic. The current data show there are few significant problems with the retention rates, success rates, and completion rates for people in the designated equity groups once they enrol in higher education.” Nonetheless, he does state that “non-traditional” students in Australia (from rural, low socio-economic status and indigenous backgrounds) are more costly to attract to university and require more academic support and other forms of assistance once there. Further, diversity presents challenges for academics. Non-traditional students are unfamiliar with the
culture of universities, and less deferential to it. They are more easily identified as “weaker” students (James and Beckett, 2000). Expanding participation imposes additional “ambient costs” on universities in associated infrastructure, facilities and services (Chipman, 2000). Yorke and Longden (2004) therefore conclude that “there is a message here for all institutions, but particularly for those that seek to enrol students from disadvantaged backgrounds: they need to back up their efforts to recruit students with actions that are likely to encourage sustained success,” (p.9).

In summary, there is no evidence that broadening participation leads to reduction in rates of retention, success and completion (Universities Australia, 2008). However, it does result in an increase in the numbers of students who will need to be actively assisted by support and other services. The role of support services in retention efforts is discussed later, but first an overall examination of factors contributing to completion will be made.

**Factors contributing to retention**

The Australian Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST), which administered the teaching and learning fund discussed earlier, has reported that the first year progress rate is highly indicative of the progress rate for subsequent study years. Also, DEST has asserted that the likelihood of a student discontinuing study is highest in the first year (Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005). Yorke (2000) also notes that a substantial proportion of non-completions take place during, or at the end of, the first year in higher education. He identifies the following as the main factors contributing to non-completion:

- wrong choice of program;
- unhappiness with the environment of the institution;
- dissatisfaction with aspects of institutional provision;
- inability to cope with the demands of the program;
- poor quality of the student experience;
- financial and interpersonal problems;
• lack of peer support.

For Darlaston-Jones et al. (2001) factors impinging on retention rates include the background characteristics of students (disposition and expectations on entry, goal commitment, social and academic experiences after entry), as well as institutional factors (size of institution, type and nature of the course). James (2002, p.77) acknowledges external factors: “It is easy to uncouple from the university experience if the academic and social net allows you to slip through, perhaps more so when the external world offers multiple distractions and opportunities.” However he also refers to some of the characteristics of higher retention: “the opportunity to disentangle oneself from the university seems to be less of a problem in highly intensive, highly structured academic courses, especially those with small cohorts allowing the development of strong interpersonal rapport between staff and students;” (James, 2002, p.77). There is also evidence that dropping out of higher education is related to students’ lack of knowledge of what they are getting into in the first place (Baldwin and James, 2000). In addition, early failure can be a powerful disincentive to continuation (Yorke, 2000).

It is clear that initial experiences in higher education are critical. Feeling welcome and belonging matter to students. This counterbalances anxiety, and helps stage the development of independence. Those who feel disconnected from an institution are more likely to withdraw than those who feel connected (Darlaston-Jones et al., 2001). A significant number of first year students find their experience of university to be so different from their expectation that they do not continue. In contrast to feeling welcome, Yorke (2000) points out that students may be taken aback by the anonymity of large lecture rooms, or by the absence of close attention to their academic progress. There is often a mismatch between the expectations and reality of university life. The person-environment fit is an important variable in terms of student experience. Again, there are tensions here. Meeting student expectations for choice and flexibility is at odds with the unfolding development of curriculum that is known to produce the best academic outcomes (James, 2002). University managers have an obligation to balance responding to expectations with ensuring a coherent overall educational experience.
It is also apparent that a broad range of responses are required to respond to the varied factors contributing to students becoming at risk of exiting from their course. McInnis & James (2004) summarise these as follows: careful recruitment, attending to transition, quality teaching, an appealing university culture, and comprehensive support services. Of these, given the importance of the “first year experience”, universities in Australia have paid increasing attention to programs assisting the transition into higher education. Darlaston-Jones et al. (2001) propose that a university wide transition program that incorporates initial adjustment strategies with ongoing support through first year helps students cope with and adjust to the demands of university life. I will look at the issue of transition in more detail below. But it is first worth examining these questions: Are there any hidden costs in a high retention rate? Is retention at any cost always “good”?

Is Retention Always Good?

For Yorke (200), non-completion of study is often a consequence of idiosyncratic variables, and hence can only be minimised, rather than eliminated. Sharkin (2004) and Rummel et al. (1999) also challenge the assumption that one hundred percent retention rates are achievable, or even desirable. The latter propose that students excluded from university as well as those who have self identified as not able to handle academic rigour, are better off attending other institutions where teaching and learning styles are more compatible with them. There are certainly repercussions for the reputation of a university if below standard students graduate with the university’s imprimatur and enter the workforce.

In addition, Rummel et al. (1999) argue that no university can be all things to all people, and even some very capable and high performing students may leave because they are not obtaining what they need from a particular university. All the retention efforts in the world would be ineffective for students within this category. In other words, a mature
university must accept that even with the best preparation, standards and intent, the “fit” between individual student and the university is never perfect nor possible for all.

Furthermore, whilst a variety of initiatives can assist in helping maintain the academic engagement of students, there are situations where the most appropriate, healthy and wise course of action is for a student to suspend studies, either temporarily or permanently. This nevertheless acknowledges that “the decision to leave a programme before the end is rarely taken lightly, and is often anguished,” (Yorke and Longden, 2004, p.8), because, among other things, it has social stigma attached. It can arise as a result of personal, emotional and social circumstances which no amount of inspired intervention can nor should ameliorate. Coping with increasing independence and the accompanying anxiety produces complex outcomes amongst members of university populations. Events can conspire to mean that it is simply not in a student’s best interests to continue studying at that time. The reasons may be financial, or related to experiences of trauma, or family relationships, or accommodation, or any number of other factors, the effects of which can only be gauged in the particular context of the life of the individual concerned.

In these cases, it would be both irresponsible and unprofessional for universities to be anything other than supportive and facilitative of a graceful exit from the university at that time. Once study is suspended, or abandoned, many external factors influence whether such a student resumes at the same or any other institution. However universities can play a role at exit in helping to form a favourable impression of the institution through that very process. This in turn may impact on decisions regarding a subsequent return to study. Proper management of the exit progress should enable a student to depart with a clear idea of the issues leading to their decision, an intact sense of wellbeing, and an attitude of optimism about possible re-engagement with higher education.

In short, it appears unreasonable and inappropriate for a university to aim for complete retention. Institutions will benefit from enhancing the retention rates of students who can be academically and socially successful in their particular context. In addition, having a process for identifying those who should continue, and those who should not, and having
systems to respond accordingly, arise as of importance. The role of support services in this regard is now examined.

**Support Services and Retention**

In a study of the role of support services and retention, Promnitz & Germain (1996) point out that obtaining a direct empirical link between use of student support services and enrolment retention or positive academic outcomes is difficult, given the many extraneous variables which impact on the lives of students, including motivation, family and financial circumstances, and unforeseen events. Nonetheless, they propose that support services do assist students deal with processes of social, emotional and academic adjustment. These authors found that “student psychological” state is a variable strongly associated with student initiated withdrawal from study, and is often characterised by problems integrating into social life, homesickness and loneliness, financial hardship, anxiety, low self esteem, depression, lack of motivation and relationship conflicts.

Evidence however suggests that it is unusual for just one factor to influence a student’s decision to leave university (McInnis & James, 2004). Personal problems are important, but these interact with other issues – for example, disliking their course or institute. Tolerating poor teaching is possible, but made harder if personal factors are in play as well. There is also “considerable diversity in terms of life-stages as to which factors are likely to combine to provoke the decision to leave,” (McInnis & James, 2004, p. 41). The limits of purely psychological explanations have been thoroughly explored by Yorke and Longden (2004) who prefer to draw on sociological theories in seeing student departure as the outcome of transactions between a student and institution.

Nonetheless, some of the factors that place students at risk of dropping out of university may also lead those students to avail of support services, and many of the students that universities would like to retain leave tertiary study because of the contribution of personal difficulties (Turner & Berry, 2000). Researchers have noted increasing levels of
psychopathology among students seen in university counselling services in recent times (Connell, Barkham & Mellor-Clark, 2007); Wilson, Mason & Ewing, 1997), including students presenting with eating disorders, problem drug or alcohol use, mental illness, self harming behaviour, and suicidality. The picture is complicated by the fact that academic difficulties can of themselves beget personal problems, which in turn may take on a life of their own and require direct intervention above and beyond academic and study skills responses.

It makes sense that changes in the emotional and social functioning of students might be related to subsequent academic outcomes. There is evidence from several studies in the United States that receiving counselling aids retention. Wilson, Mason & Ewing (1997) found that counselling had a positive impact on a student’s likelihood of succeeding in college, compared to non counselled counterparts who had requested counselling but not followed through (whilst controlling for college entry scores). These authors speculate that counselling can assist in negotiating critical periods when students are most vulnerable to dropping out, and help students acquire skills to become more successful at meeting their own needs and to feel integrated into the social world of the university.

A later, longitudinal study over six years at another American university found that the retention rates of counselled students were repeatedly better than rates for the entire student body (Turner & Berry, 2000). In this study, a large majority of counselling clients reported a relationship between personal problems and academic difficulties, and subsequently reported that the counselling they received was helpful in maintaining their academic performance. This is unsurprising given the developmental changes that characterise transition to and participation in higher education, including maintaining anxiety within reasonable bounds whilst developing increasing independence.

**Transition**
For many individuals, the transition to higher education signifies a time of emotional, social and academic development and adjustment (Promnitz & Germain, 1996). As this paper has emphasised, entering university is exciting but often associated with anxiety, and in many cases can lead to students failing or withdrawing from university. In particular, the passage from adolescence to adulthood involves developmental processes characterised by a movement towards independence and the evolution of a personal sense of identity. This is inevitably a somewhat turbulent period, and its fluidity can make people of this age vulnerable to problems (Rana, 2002).

Indeed, student populations report higher levels of symptoms of anxiety than the norm for their age group (for example Harrison et al., 1999; Stallman, 2008; Webb et al., 1996). The reasons why students might show these levels of anxiety are numerous, for example:

- the process of developing an adult identity, in the context of pursuing studies including, often, a profession;
- the complicated and often difficult processes of engagement and identification with other students, with academic and professional staff, and with the University as an entity;
- the pressure of work and assessments;
- the need to develop and deploy skills in independent learning;
- the need to manage financial and accommodation arrangements;
- the common uncertainty about future pathways;
- the impact of being in a large organisation, which can exacerbate individual vulnerability;
- having to adjust to a move away from home, family, school or work.

Thus coping with stress, balancing study with employment and a social life, developing interpersonal skills, planning a career, and understanding and managing emotions (such as the capacity to tolerate the “normal” anxiety that comes with adapting to unfamiliar environments), are all part of the successful passage into and through university. It is clear that these have practical and psychological components (Rickinson, 1998).
At the same time however, this period also affords an opportunity for growth, a chance to find new solutions to old situations (Rana, 2002). In its simplest terms, the tension between independence and anxiety is played out. Whilst many negotiate the period adequately, a significant number of students do not, with variation in the capacity to make the most of developmental opportunities afforded by the learning environment of the university. Accordingly, proper provision for monitoring, assessment and support for these students needs to be considered by managers in universities. This is part of a broader strategy of promoting student academic progress and retention, and viewing students’ functioning as a totality.

There is evidence for the effectiveness of interventions with students at academic or personal risk as early as possible (Rickinson, 1998) – including prior to the commencement of their time at university (Yorke, 2000). This approach is of benefit to all parties; student can establish academic success and esteem; universities can avoid the costs associated with unsatisfactory progress processes and poor retention; governments can be assured their investment in higher education is not being “wasted”. But what interventions are likely to be effective?

Examples of “triggers” that might activate an early response to assist a student remaining in a course include:

- Use of a pre commencement questionnaire, in which a student identifies any issues that may hamper their capacity to engage with university life;
- Failure of first assessment task;
- Concerns by any staff member (academic or professional) about any student, which might arise as a result of their behaviour, appearance or other signs such as non attendance.

These are potentially useful, practical and relevant triggers. However the question arises: how would they be consistently applied and implemented, and what responses would ensue? Rickinson (1998) reports some evidence for the effectiveness of psychoeducational programs aimed at supporting students identified as at academic risk early in first year. In addition, AUQA (2007) issued a “Good Practice Award” to
Auckland University of Technology (AUT) for a “First Year Experience Intervention and Support Program”. This program has identified a clear set of triggers for early identification of students at risk, including non attendance in the first four weeks of semester, non submission of assignments, and failure of assignments. AUT’s student management system is then used to monitor and track status and outcomes. The intervention process is thorough and consistent. Older year students from the volunteer student mentor program are employed casually as “FYE Assistants” to contact students at risk by phone, email or SMS. The goal for the interaction is to create rapport through interaction, unpack the issues affecting studies, and assist with connection to university or other support services. The student to student contact is reputed to build a stronger connection than staff to student. Often several contacts are made with the one student. This accords with Darlaston-Jones et al. (2001), who propose that peer support reduces the anxiety and embarrassment associated with seeking or needing help.

Results of this program indicate significant increases in retention, completion and success for those who receive contact compared to those who are at risk but not able to be contacted (or who decline assistance). This in turn has had significant financial benefits for the institution, more than compensating for the investment of expenditure in employment of FYE assistants. The AUT experience does underline that it is not sufficient to merely identify students at risk; there needs to be a comprehensive intervention then consistently applied in order for the system to have effectiveness.

However, there is then the question of how much intervention is appropriate? Universities need to support, monitor but not “nanny” students, preserving instead students’ genuine capacity to experience independence in a staged fashion (along with a capacity to tolerate a “normal” amount of anxiety). As Yorke (2000) puts it, “a fine line has to be trodden between the desire to ‘hand-hold’ as students come to terms with a new environment, and that of encouraging the autonomy that institutions seek to develop through their curricula and social activities.” (p.83). This leads to a concluding question of the extent to which universities should be expected to play a role in the broader development of their students.
Conclusion - Graduate Attributes and Student Personal Development

In recent years, Australian universities have attempted to articulate the attributes they ascribe to their graduates. Again this has been driven by a Government emphasis on promoting educational standards through outcome measures such as graduate destinations, and student perceptions of course quality (Harman, 2003). The process has often resulted in aspirational statements, of the academic, leadership, and citizenship qualities and values that a university hopes to instill in their graduating students, by virtue of those students’ participation in learning at that particular institution. The graduate attributes of different universities have tended to morph, so that the unique contributions of a university tend to be lost in a wealth of warm, fuzzy and broad aspirations.

However the important issue here is that these attributes rarely address the personal development qualities of their students. Yet as noted, university is an arena in which critical developmental processes are played out. Moreover, it is often the case that students may appear to be highly successful in academic and other terms which are assessed by various outward measures, but still have failed to establish a range of vital personal attributes which support a healthy and balanced adult life. Such students may operate at a high academic level but lack those qualities such as independence, maturity and life management skills which become more evident and valuable once a graduate enters the workforce.

A university cannot take responsibility for creating well-functioning graduates in isolation from many other factors such as family issues, societal pressures, and the expectations of students themselves. However, it has a potential role through its interaction with students, and in the manner in which it provides all of its experiences, to model and promote the characteristics it hopes to facilitate in its graduates. “Awareness of self and others, the capacity to express oneself and relate constructively to others, to exercise self-control even at times of high emotion, and to cope with the various
challenges that life throws up, all have a part to play in student success,” (Yorke & Longden, 2004, p.83). It could also be argued that universities have a responsibility not to "de-skill" students in life competencies through overly facilitating narrow but high level academic achievements. The navigation of independence again arises as relevant, as part of the idea that universities have a role to promote attributes that include an aspect of personal development, or at least the capacity for “practical intelligence” to manage the messy situations that life throws up, as part of a broader approach to retention and graduate attributes (Yorke and Longden, 2004). In other words, if universities should operate by “nurturing people’s native intelligence and making them more adaptable and capable of working in a complex world,” (Karmel, 1996, p. 334), then they need face the challenge of promoting a holistic view of students’ development.

The tension for universities is between offering support whilst providing challenge (James, 2002) – that is, between managing anxiety and promoting independence. As this paper has highlighted, the right balance to strike in responding to this tension is not always easy to find. “Neither nannying nor neglecting” might be one summary. Exploring attempts at translating that into practice would now seem a valuable object for detailed investigation, as it constitutes a considerable task for universities in the context of their choices and decisions regarding the degree of responsibility for the broader development of their students.
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