Making the transition from the VET sector to higher education: Challenges and rewards

Presented by
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Academic Enrichment
Introduction

This talk today presents outcomes of doctoral research which explored the experiences of a small group of students in transition from the VET sector to higher education. It considers:
Transformational Learning Theory (Jack Mezirow)

Some key challenges which emerged from the study:
- Inconsistencies in knowledge equivalencies
- Different teaching approaches
- The need to develop a student identity & sense of belonging
- Balancing work/study/home life

Managing the challenges

Recommendations from the research
A brief overview of Transformational Learning Theory

Mezirow (2000) refers to transformation as ‘a movement through time of reformulating reified structures of meaning by reconstructing dominant narratives’.

It is Mezirow’s assertion that the ability of learners to engage in a renegotiation of ‘self’ or identity can lead to transformation. Mezirow states that, while an individual’s beliefs, including their self-concept, are initially shaped by social and cultural influences (e.g., parents and peer groups), these habitual ways of thinking are not necessarily static.

With reflection, frames of reference, or *habits of mind* may be held up to scrutiny.

Consequently, specific attitudes, values, beliefs or judgements may be transformed.
Transformation and adult learning

Mezirow refers to transformation as the ultimate aim of learning. When students follow through with their aspirations to attend university, there is often evidence of:

- a conscious determination to improve their lives (Fuller, 2014)
- a desire to build independence (Fuller, 2014)
- a positive influence on the formation and development of professional imaginings (Høj Jensen & Jetten, 2016).

When referring to intergenerational attitudes inspired by and inspiring first-in-family (FiF) student participation in higher education, O’Shea, et al. (2016, p. 11) refer to family ‘discourses of betterment and opportunity’.

- So, what are the pathways that students take to higher education?
Pathways to HE in Australia are diverse

Basis of admission for undergraduate university enrolments 2016

- VET course: 47%
- Secondary education with ATAR: 26%
- Secondary education without ATAR: 12%
- Mature age entry: 11%
- Other basis: 4%

(adapted from Pilcher & Torii, 2018)
The research

The purpose of my research was to investigate the potential of learning to be a transformative experience for students in transition from VET to higher education.

A qualitative approach was taken, with narrative interviewing deemed most appropriate to the development of understandings of transitions and transformations with this small group of learners.

Overall, it was apparent that the transition experience is potentially one which holds many challenges as well as rewards for adult learners such as those in the study.

- The participants were from 2 TAFE pathways:
  - 1. The Tertiary Preparation Certificate IV (TPC)
  - 2. The EN Diploma
Demographic profiles of participants in the study

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The AQF & the research participants

The AQF (2013) situates the Certificate IV at Level 4 of the framework.
At this level, students should demonstrate broad factual, technical and some theoretical knowledge, as well as a range of cognitive, technical and communication skills.

The AQF (2013) situates a Diploma qualification at Level 5 of the framework, whereby students will have a broad range of cognitive, technical and communication skills to select and apply methods and technologies to:

- Analyse information to complete a range of activities
- Provide and transmit solutions to sometimes complex problems
- Communicate information and skills to others

Diploma students often receive credit transfer
Credit transfer

Credit transfer as defined in the AQF:
A process that provides students with agreed and consistent credit outcomes for components of a qualification based on identified equivalence in content and learning outcomes between matched qualifications.

The credit transfer process involves:
Mapping, comparing and evaluating the extent to which the learning outcomes, discipline content and assessment requirements of the individual components of one qualification are equivalent to the learning outcomes, discipline content and assessment requirements of the individual components of another qualification, and making a judgment about the credit to be assigned between the matched components of the two qualifications.

- Sounds perfect!
- But…
Credit transfer or catching up?

It is often the case that students who enter the second year of a degree program with credit often lack the ‘embedded knowledge’ that students already familiar with the academic literacies of university possess (Penesis et al., 2015).

… their ability to write an essay is that much better than mine and their grades are really good… (M)

Credit transfer students often struggle to communicate knowledge and ideas through a lack of ‘academic scaffolding’ (Jackson et al., 2010).

However, usually there will be a requirement for these students to almost immediately produce high-quality, well-written and critically developed texts.

…here … you’re starting and everything’s new and you’re trying to work out how to do essays, how to do this and you’ve still gotta work out how to go home and sit down and spend that time … dedicate that time to … educate yourself, it’s not like you can just listen to a lecture without actually taking it in cos you’re gonna get tested on it, you’ve gotta know … (S)
There can be an assumption by educators that transitioning learners are at an equal academic level to other students in second year of university (Christie et al., 2013).

But..

... I don’t really know what to do ... they don’t really give you that one-on-one help... (A)

... uni expects us to be at second-year level coming into it so ... it’s hard ... we’re going into second year and it’s expected ... it’s assumed that we know stuff like this ... the expectations are that much higher because we’ve done ... meant to have done all first year, which we haven’t done ... so the assumption is definitely there that we are at that level ... (M)

... it’s uni and you feel that you’re mature and so you ought to be able to kind of ... think for yourself and do stuff for yourself ...(AL)

... there’s just so much information that’s not told to you ... (S)

I guess there’s the realisation that you have to teach yourself (T)
Inconsistencies in knowledge equivalencies

When students from a practical-based further education course enter the more academically rigorous HE sector problems in communication can occur.

It is sometimes the case that these transitioning students have a limited epistemological schema of the depth of knowledge and metacognitive requirements of HE study or of how to put into practice those academic skills expected.

As Sparks, Song and Lui (2014) note, ‘At the HE level, writing should involve critical and reflective engagement with others’ ideas, development and support of one’s own ideas, skill in producing compelling arguments directed to an audience, and fluency with producing coherent and logical written text that is free of errors’.

Essentially, students have to learn how to communicate

‘Communication is *simply* the act of transferring information from one place to another’

(www.skillsyouneed.com)
Teaching approaches

Differences between teaching approaches have also been identified as a significant challenge for many students transitioning from VET to higher education (Ryan et al., 2017; Savelsberg et al., 2017). For example, it can bring the challenge of greater expectations of independent learning at university compared with the more guided approach to teaching experienced at TAFE.

This was more difficult for some than for others in the early phase of transition:

...at university ... they don’t teach us, it’s all self-directed and I never ever knew that university was like that, I always thought that at university you got taught, so I think the gap between the two is so big ... I think it’s bigger than what TAFE and university thinks ...(S)

I want you to teach me, I feel that I’m coming to an institution to be taught ... they actually need to teach us something you know? (T)

...students should try as much as they can to do stuff on their own ...not to rely on teachers ... 'cos if they do that when they come here ... they’ll be really shocked (A)

... I need to be a more organised and prioritised person... there’s a lot of self-learning and you have to be self-motivated ... (M)

However, Crosling (2017, p. 2) asserts that, while it is incumbent upon students to persist in their studies, institutes need to be ‘dynamic and student responsive’, especially when considering the diverse nature of students and their needs.
Developing a student identity

Developing a student identity that incorporates a belief in the self as a university student and the need to establish a new identity as a university student can be especially challenging (Fuller, 2018; Tett et al., 2017).

Well I grew up in housing commission...everyone knows of course there’s a university, you know, but the avenues of how you get there, it’s not made apparent where I grew up ... because when your parents don’t have that level of education ... you’re not really exposed to that type of thing (C)

Newly transitioning students sometimes face a sense of loss of identity on first entering the higher education system, as the successful student identity they had adopted at school or college is no longer replicable in the larger, more impersonal environment of university.

During the transition process, students often experience a sense of alienation and marginality which can be increased by a lack of familiarity with the concept of being ‘a university student’ (Leece, 2014).

New adaptations of identity may therefore be required by participation in higher education, especially if transitioning students have no established socio-cultural pattern of participation in higher education (eg. FiF students)
Reconstructing identity

It is Dirkx’s (1998) contention that adults engaged in formal learning often find themselves situated between old frames of reference and the need to create new ones, which involves letting go of old constructions of self and reconstructing a new identity. Blair et al. (2010) note that the process of identity formation is an ongoing and negotiable one when adults engage in new learning experiences, and that it is a staged progression requiring a reflexive approach.

Positive aspects of this were a feature of the study:

… well I guess I never really had a belief that I would do it … my kids are seeing a different side of mum … a completely different side of mum (T)
… I never thought I’d go to university (B)

… if you’d asked me 10 years ago … there’s no way I would ever have thought I’d be able to get a degree and now I’m looking at … having three degrees by the time I’m 35 … … I think I’ve matured, I feel like I’ve got self-awareness, self-confidence that I can believe that I can do it …(Ś)
Building a sense of belonging: ‘I feel like a bit of an imposter...’ (C)

Wilson et al. (2016, p. 1024) refer to the need for transitioning students to have a sense of ‘personal fit’ as a university student, which comes with a sense of belonging.

The importance of developing a sense of belonging to the university is supported by unmasking and refuting any notions of a singular, homogenous identity of what a university student is (Cunninghame, 2017; Matheson & Sutcliffe, 2017).

Research indicates that increasing involvement in study and a consequent development of a sense of belonging can be attained through measures designed to build connectedness (Burke et al., 2016). This process can be enhanced through building networks of friendship and collegiality within the university (Bathmaker et al., 2013).

- It seems logical then that building a sense of belonging and an identity that encompasses university participation should be an intervention that occupies educators in higher education.
A balancing act

A final but equally important challenge to be considered is the necessity often faced by students to balance the many facets of their complex lives in ways that accommodate their study needs while also accounting for their lives outside university (Wilson et al., 2016).

I have to have one day off and then just really manage my time … I’m trying to find a balance … I just think you get through the next six months, do the next semester and then … just see what happens… (T)

This is often particularly difficult in the case of transitioning students who are mature age, already working and have added family commitments (Habel et al., 2017; Tett et al., 2017).

These added responsibilities can necessitate ‘juggling’ the competing demands of outside work and study requirements while maintaining some quality of life.

Time management is often an ongoing issue in the early days of transition (Christie et al., 2013).

I have to delegate chores … to enjoy life … and so I just really have to time plan it, you have to have some time off, you can’t just study seven days a week, you’ve gotta have some fun too and just really manage that …(T)
I can do it all!
Time and Money

The need to constantly balance the competing demands that transitioning students can face is highlighted in literature that finds a connection between part-time study mode and high attrition rates (Norton et al., 2018).

For example, Norton et al. (2018) state that the single most defining factor in whether a student is likely to drop out of university in Australia is their status as a part-time student who is also working.

The report found that 40% of part-time university students work between 20 and 29 hours per week; consequently, almost 40% of part-time students will consider leaving their university course because of an inability to find a suitable study/life balance (Norton et al., 2018).

Every now and then I get a bit of pressure about working full-time … I’m 27 and I should be working full-time … I’m just thinking to myself you know, what’s going on? I’ll be 30 … 31 … really the pressure … it’s about earning money …(C)
Headspace (2016, p. 30), a mental health initiative funded by the Australian Government, finds that almost 65% of mature-age learners cite the difficulty of finding a workable balance as the key impediment to academic success.

Yeah … it was a bit sad to leave [work] but there’s things you have to do (B)

…I need to support myself so that I’m not leaving things to the last minute, so that I’m not going, ‘Oh, I’ve gotta go to work and I’ve gotta go to uni and I just don’t wanna do it anymore’ (M)

… prioritising … especially when we go on placement we’re not supposed to work … but you know there’s not many people that can just take four weeks off … (S)
The role of adaptability & resilience

Illeris (2014, p. 584) believes that when learning becomes demanding it is essential that the individual embrace these new demands rather than meet them with ‘defence or resistance’.

Fuller (2018) asserts that confidence and determination are leading qualities in academic success: this may be linked to taking responsibility, being adaptable and resilient:

*I’m pretty dedicated … you have to take the onus on yourself, be self-disciplined … I need to set aside time, it’s full-time learning and I need to put in some really serious hours … for those benefits to come back (M)*

*… it’s adult learning, it’s up to you to go home … and figure out how to do it, you’ve gotta … educate yourself … be prepared to put the work in … to sacrifice a few things, put the time and effort in … just keep adjusting … (AL)*

*I’m still here; I’m not going to let anyone discourage me … I’m going to keep going and keep pushing and keep fighting until I get where I want to be. I just wanna keep going and keep going, it’s gonna be hard but I’m up for a challenge (A)*
Supporting students in transition

According to the Australian Government Discussion Paper (2017) student support services in HE must include:

- Foundational or transitional programs
- Academic support services
- Personal support services

When these services are in place positive outcomes may be accelerated:
Achieving Positive outcomes

It’s very different to TAFE … the workload is still quite overwhelming … so sometimes the lectures take me four hours to work out … but I think I’m getting there [laughs] … I feel like I’ve gotten a better handle on it … some weeks have been a lot harder than others … but I’ve got a different mindset (M)

… I’m enjoying uni, I don’t feel like it’s a burden or anything for me … I felt that once I get into it I do it to a good standard, so I’m doing well …(B)

… I love the life I have now, I love the work that I do … it’s made me wanna be there and have that knowledge about my patients and you know, just be better at what I do … it sort of makes me want to have more knowledge and experience (M)

Changing aspirations:
I also want to travel the world and kind of just … help poor people in Africa… some can’t really afford to go to the hospital to … give birth … there’s a lack of everything (A)

… I’m trying to get a placement on my next prac with CareFlight at Broken Hill …I love my degree, I really, really enjoy it, I should have done it years ago, … I can’t fault it … you know it was a shock to the system for me … but … it’s very good (S)

I think long term I would love to work in oncology and maybe progress higher in that field, I wouldn’t mind going to theatre as well (A1)
Recommendations from the research

Results from my research and the literature suggest the following measures for transitioning students:

- Timely bridging programs for pathways students
- Ongoing inter-sectoral communications
- Building student resourcefulness
- Measures that develop a sense of belonging
- Encouragement of FiF intergenerational participation in higher education
Provide timely bridging programs for pathways students

Wilson et al. (2016) believe that access to bridging programs is particularly vital in the first three weeks of transition.

Abbott-Chapman (2011) argues that preparing students prior to university enrolment is a key factor, along with continuing support throughout the first year of university.

Bridging programs should include learning tools for new pathways students, such as online self-learning portals (Wilson et al., 2016). Blended learning for students newly transitioning to university can be a means of enabling the development of learning skills in different domains (Weadon & Baker, 2015).

- Indications from the experiences of the students in my study suggest that programs which include development of skills in independent learning, research and e-learning may be the most valuable as targeted support for transition students.
Commit to ongoing inter-sectoral communications

Educators involved in pathways to university programs need to effectively communicate with each other on a regular and ongoing basis.

This can best support transitioning students and maximise the potential for transformative outcomes for students.

Closer inter-sectoral mapping of course content could identify and address potential gaps in knowledge that students with credit transfer may experience (Watson, et al., 2013).
Encourage student resourcefulness

Encouragement of characteristics such as adaptability and resilience may contribute to a more satisfactory and successful transition.

Collie et al. (2017) argue that places of learning that provide an emphasis on the relationship between ‘effort and achievement’ may go some way towards helping students understand the self-efficacy of developing an ability to adapt to the demands of university
Provide measures that encourage a sense of belonging

Burke et al. (2016, p. 55) suggest that ‘legitimisation as a proper and deserving’ student of higher education centres on discourses of belonging.

To optimise the potential for rewarding outcomes for students, findings from my study indicate that higher education providers must consider implementing (early in the transition stage), measures that promote a sense of belonging to the university.

Research also suggests that programs offered in the early days of transition encouraging students to build social networks within the university can increase engagement and raise aspirations (Anderson et al., 2016; Brouwer et al., 2016; Burke, 2016; Mezirow, 1978; Tett et al., 2017; Zepke, 2013).
Encourage FiF intergenerational participation in higher education

Research indicates that FiF students are highly likely to come from a low SES background, necessitating participation in the workplace while they study (King et al., 2015, p. 8).

However, Smith (2011) argues that by simply sharing their accounts of their experiences of higher education, FiF students can provide encouragement to other family members to consider university as an option.

… coming here was never purely about getting a job … it was something that I wanted to do … something that I could be proud of and something that when I eventually have children I can say, ‘Well look you know, I did it, why don’t you finish high school’ … the big drive for me … was being able to give them advice … (C)

… the other advantage for me is I believe that I’m really teaching my kids some good values … whatever you wanna do in life you can achieve if you set your mind to it … I can say to my kids, ‘You know, it’s worth doing’ … so I think university might be our new normal, you never know …(T)
In conclusion

The experiences of the transition students in my study attest to the notion that learning can be life-changing, whether through vindication for taking on the task of commitment to further education such as a degree program or through the personal benefits derived from the learning experience.

The benefits highlighted in this study included changes to perspectives that incorporated a reimagining of the self and the opportunity to reimagine the future.

Support, especially in the first semester, is an important factor for all students, but perhaps especially so for those transitioning students who will articulate directly into second year of their degree program.

But we also need to consider the efficacy of encouraging independent approaches to learning that incorporate adaptability and resilience which in turn may empower students and lead to a successful and rewarding transition experience.
References

References


Thank you

- Questions?