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Flexible Delivery and Student Attrition in the Vocational Education and Training Sector: Case Studies of Students Who Dropped Out

Lauri Grace

Deakin University

INTRODUCTION

Government policy in Australia is increasingly encouraging training organisations in the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector to adopt flexible delivery approaches as an integral part of the National Training Reform Agenda (Flexible Delivery Working Party, 1992, p 9). This policy shift is supported by key VET stakeholders including Industry Training Advisory Boards (Evans & Smith, 1999). A recurring theme in VET policy documents is an apparent confidence that flexible delivery can meet the diverse needs of individual learners while at the same time providing cost savings (eg Flexible Delivery Working Party, 1992). Yet evidence is emerging that Australian VET learners are not typically ready for flexible delivery (Warner, Christie & Choy, 1998; Smith 2000), and the national VET statistical collection reveals that some flexible delivery modes have significantly higher attrition rates and lower pass rates than other delivery strategies (Misko, 1999; 2000).

Research on student progress in flexible delivery within the Australian VET sector has largely been quantitative. That research provides useful statistical data on completion and attrition rates for flexible delivery, but does not explore the reasons underlying the high attrition rates identified. Misko noted that:

There are many reasons which may account for a student’s academic success or probability of passing a course. This means that although it is quite straightforward to produce tables of module outcomes ... across the different modes of delivery, it is difficult to decide whether or not these outcomes are a direct consequence of the delivery strategy employed (Misko, 2000, p 16).

The qualitative research that does explore the factors contributing to Australian VET students’ academic progress in flexible delivery tends to be conducted with students who have successfully completed their studies, not those who have withdrawn (Warner, Christie & Choy, 1998; Misko, 2000). As a result, the Australian literature on flexible delivery in the VET sector is lacking in-depth qualitative information about students who enrol in courses but do not complete. In comparison, the literature on distance education and flexible delivery in other educational sectors, and in other countries, offers some useful insights into student attrition, and can be used to inform research into attrition within the Australian VET sector.

This paper reports on aspects of a research project that followed up six adult learners who enrolled in VET courses but did not achieve a successful outcome in the sense of completing their award. The paper focuses in particular on how the stories of these adult learners relate to two themes drawn from the literature on distance education and flexible delivery:

- Student dropout is often not determined by a single factor, but by the interaction of a number of factors which build up over time.
- Students who experience difficulties when studying by flexible delivery can often be reluctant to access the support that is available to them.
THE PARTICIPANTS' STORIES

‘Keryn’

Keryn enrolled to study by flexible delivery because it allowed her to fit study around her other commitments, which included working night shift and caring for her three young children. In her first semester of study Keryn was also providing care for her terminally ill mother. Despite the many demands on her time and energy, Keryn successfully completed her first two units. She particularly enjoyed these units, as the content was new and different and related to issues she was dealing with at work. But Keryn found that the next three units she attempted were quite different. Not only did the content deal with matters that had been an integral part of her job for many years, but Keryn also found the assignment instructions vague and difficult to understand. A misunderstanding about the fee structure for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) discouraged Keryn from applying for exemption based on her extensive industry experience. She completed most of the assignment tasks, but did not submit her work for assessment as she was uncertain about the instructions and concerned that a ‘fail’ result would be a ‘black mark’ on her student record. When her daughter was diagnosed with a serious medical condition, Keryn reviewed her commitments and withdrew from her course.

‘Craig’

Like Keryn, Craig was attracted to flexible delivery because he could fit study around his other commitments, which included two jobs. A misunderstanding saw him enrolled in the equivalent to full-time study, with a workload that he quickly realised was unmanageable. Craig attended compulsory study skills workshops, where his workload problem was identified and corrected. At these workshops Craig came to understand that his preferred learning style was ‘hands-on’, but he did not develop any new learning strategies to help him deal successfully with the course materials which relied heavily on learning by reading. The practical activities suggested in the course materials were in the form of suggested site visits, but as the materials had been imported from another state the suggested sites were inaccessible to Craig. Similarly, the additional resources suggested in the learning materials were not available in any libraries to which Craig had access. Frustrated at his lack of progress, Craig contacted other training providers seeking a course better suited to his learning style. When he found a course that was described as ‘80% hands-on’ he dropped out of the flexible delivery course he was enrolled in.

‘Catherine’

Catherine was returning to paid employment after an eight-year break to care for her young children, and she enrolled in a course to update her skills, improve her confidence, and to show prospective employers that she was serious about getting a job. She expected to enrol in a part-time on-campus course, but was offered flexible delivery instead. She used the on-campus study facilities and accessed support and advice from the course facilitators. As she progressed past the basic levels of her course Catherine was frustrated that the facilitator on duty was not always able to answer questions about specific components of the course. Catherine missed being able to interact with other students and a regular teacher, and on one occasion she was most indignant that one of the course facilitators ‘talked down’ to her, advising her that she needed to plan her time better. Halfway through the course Catherine was offered casual work that developed into ongoing part-time employment. She initially intended to return to her course but never did. Catherine felt that study had helped her confidence, but beyond that did not feel that the course had helped her get the job.

‘Matthew’

Matthew initially enrolled in a flexible delivery course because he was working full-time and could not attend regular classes. When he was retrenched from his job he converted his enrolment to full-time so that he could claim income support through Austudy. He successfully completed a Certificate level course by flexible delivery, and then went on to complete a Diploma through full-time on-campus study. Having completed the Diploma, Matthew was initially only able to find...
casual work. As the income was not reliable enough to meet his needs, Matthew again enrolled in a full-time flexible delivery course and claimed Austudy. Matthew described this as ‘a strategic point’ – while the casual work continued, the main benefit he gained from his enrolment was financial; should the casual work come to an end, Matthew could fall back on the course to increase his skills and improve his employment prospects. When the casual job became full-time, Matthew withdrew from the course.

‘Chris’

According to Chris’ student record he enrolled in a Certificate II traineeship through workplace/experiential delivery, which is considered to be a mode of flexible delivery as it does not involve instruction delivered in a predominantly face-to-face teacher-directed manner (Misko, 2000). However, Chris was unaware of the official description of his course. He described the course as a classroom-based course that included a work experience component, with some units being assessed on the job. Chris was not allowed to participate in the work experience component, as he did not complete the prerequisite classroom-based assessments. Instead Chris used his industry contacts to arrange his own work placement. Because this placement was outside the formal work experience program, Chris did not have the opportunity to use it for course assessments, and as a result he officially failed all the units that were to be assessed on the job. Chris was subsequently offered a place in a Certificate III course, but before he started he had to sign a learning contract prepared by the course coordinator.

‘Margaret’

Margaret was a retiree who enrolled in a course that was only available by flexible delivery. This suited Margaret as she had other demands on her time, including a regular commitment to a ceramic arts group. Margaret was a confident learner, and regularly used the study facilities at her college. She successfully completed several units. Later, Margaret took an overseas holiday. On return she became ill, missing thirteen weeks from her study schedule, and failing her assessment. She re-enrolled, but was having difficulty with some of the course materials. Because the scheduled facilitation sessions clashed with her ceramic arts sessions, Margaret was unable to discuss her problems with the facilitator, and she was persevering on her own.

DISCUSSION

Factors contributing to student dropout

Four of the participants in this research project had withdrawn from the courses they were enrolled in. The literature addressing flexible delivery and open and distance education identifies many specific factors that may contribute to the success or otherwise of adult learners (for example Misko, 1994; ANTA, 1996; Calder & McCollum, 1998; Thorpe, 1987; Evans, 1994). But there seems to be some agreement that in most cases success is not determined by a single factor, but by the ‘complex interplay’ of a number of issues (McAlister, 1998, p 287). Woodley (1987, pp 66-67) argued that participation in education as an adult involves both positive and negative aspects, and decisions to withdraw are made when the sum of the negative aspects of the educational experience outweighs the sum of the positive aspects.

This ‘complex interplay’ of issues is reflected in the stories told by Keryn, Craig and Catherine. When Keryn was first approached about participating in the research project, she explained that she withdrew from her course because she did not have the time to study while also working and looking after her seriously ill daughter. But later, as she described her experience in detail, it became apparent that ‘lack of time’ was just one issue for Keryn. Keryn’s time commitments were very similar in each of the two semesters that she was studying, but in the first semester she successfully completed two units, while in the second she did not complete any. The other factors that contributed to her decision to withdraw were her frustration with the content of the units, and her problems understanding the assignment instructions. The first of these might have been addressed had Keryn been granted RPL for the units where she felt she was already competent, but the incorrect
information she had been given about RPL fees became a barrier to applying. In the end, Keryn’s ‘lack of time’ issue was essentially a reluctance to allocate her limited time resources to completing assignments from which she was gaining no benefit.

Craig’s decision to withdraw also arose from a number of factors. He described how his initial workload problems started him off on the wrong foot ‘I was thinking ‘I’m not ever going to get this finished, so what’s the point in starting it?’’. And although this problem was resolved, Craig felt that ‘the seed was already embedded’. Craig spoke enthusiastically about his new understanding of his own learning style, but rather than helping him deal with the course, it seemed that this understanding only increased his frustration at the mismatch between his learning style and that required to complete the course. This was compounded by the frustration of finding that both the sites and the additional resources recommended in the course materials were based on information from another state. Instead of trying to resolve these problems, Craig put his energies into finding another course.

Catherine’s story is interesting in that she was not happy with her course despite the fact that she achieved her initial goal. Catherine’s frustration with the course, expressed as a series of ‘irritating things’, arose from a number of factors: the lack of interaction with other students and a teacher, the fact that the facilitator on duty could not always answer her questions, and the sense that one of the facilitators at least simply did not understand her circumstances or appreciate her efforts. When Catherine started work she intended to return to the course, but in the end she did not return as she could see no value in it.

Matthew’s story is quite different from the above three. His primary goal in enrolling in his second flexible delivery course was to supplement his casual income through Austudy. When his casual job became full-time he no longer needed the income supplement, and he withdrew from the course. Matthew was using flexible delivery quite strategically. His story illustrates the issue raised by Misko (2000, p 31) that some students may use flexible delivery to achieve goals that do not involve completing the course, which can lead to distorted results when formal student outcomes are used to measure the effectiveness of different modes of delivery.

Student reluctance to access support

Of the six students who participated in this research, all but Matthew experienced difficulty completing some aspect of their course requirements, yet in most cases the students did not discuss their problems with college staff. This is a real problem for flexible delivery institutions, and while there is limited discussion of this issue in the VET literature, it is an issue that is recognised in the wider literature on open and distance learning (for example, Murphy & Yum, 1998; McAlister, 1998). Some students are ‘so afraid of being a nuisance that they let small, easily solved problems develop into large, serious ones’ (Fage, 1987, 218).

The difficulties Keryn experienced with assignment instructions, and her confusion surrounding the RPL fee structure, could have been easily resolved had she contacted the staff at her institution. But while she discussed these problems with her husband, and despite the fact that she was keeping staff informed of the other demands on her time, she did not seek advice about these issues. Craig’s workload problem was addressed as soon as it became known at the beginning of the study skills workshops. But despite this successful intervention with one problem, Craig did not contact staff for assistance when he later encountered other problems working with the materials or finding sites and resources in his local area. Margaret felt unable to resolve her confusion over aspects of her course, because her other commitments prevented her attending the regular facilitation sessions. Margaret spoke in very positive terms about the course facilitator, but it simply did not occur to her to request an appointment outside the scheduled session times ‘I hadn’t thought about that’. Chris did not approach his course coordinator about using his unofficial work experience as a site for workplace assessments. Later, having signed his learning contract, Chris made a strategic decision to not ask questions about his prospects ‘I’ve decided to just sit and do my work and pass it. When I’ve got something behind me I’ll ask’.
This reluctance to discuss problems with staff is particularly intriguing in view of the fact that all these students spoke of being on good terms with staff in their courses. Only Catherine expressed dissatisfaction with the support provided by staff.

CONCLUSION

The stories of these students support the argument that adult student failure or dropout is often not attributable to a single factor, but is the result of a number of inter-connected factors that build up over time. They also illustrate that students who experience difficulties while studying by flexible delivery often do not contact staff at the institution for help and advice, even when the relationship between the student and the staff is good.

REFERENCES


Murphy, D. & Yum, J.C.K. (1998), Understanding Hong Kong distance learners’, Distance Education, vol. 19, no. 1, pp 64-80.


