

ACCUMULATING DEGREES
THROUGH TAKING SINGLE SUBJECTS
- A POSSIBILITY AT MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY

Educational Research Methods II
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ABSTRACT

The aim of the project is to determine perceptions of undergraduate students at Macquarie University who take advantage of the non-award program's guidelines which allow them, after obtaining a "C" average in first year with eighteen credit points, to obtain automatic entry into second year. Invitations were given to volunteers that were identified through my personal network, to participate in a survey questionnaire. A very positive response to the scheme was indicated by all the students. The argument could be put that like secondary education, tertiary education should be available for all who wish to take up the challenge.

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RESEARCH BACKGROUND

This issue of who gains access to higher education, and how, is of critical importance in Australian society. It is the case that all government schools admit Australian citizens regardless of their level of achievement provided they are prepared to accept the established rules of that campus. However, for tertiary education the only university that will enrol students and allow them to graduate, using the same philosophy of high schools and regardless of background, is Macquarie University. The study of alternative means of entry to university campus life to attain a degree is relevant to Admissions Centres and to the Department of Education, Employment and Training which is responsible for policy making on Higher Education funding in

Australia. As the handbook on non-award enrolment (1994 p.4), issued through the Centre For Open Learning, says, "Enrolment in single units at Macquarie University as part of the non-award program provides the opportunity to:

- * pursue a new interest for general personal development
- * participate in professional extension
- * upgrade skills and knowledge."

Such students do not pay normal student amenities fees, have full student rights, and are able to undergo any examinations and assessments and so obtain an academic record.

Under a heading titled, "Please note" (p.4) is what is unique in Admissions in Australian Universities ie. that these single subject enrolments can be accumulated towards degrees in Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science provided students obtain a C grade (pass) after completing 18 credit points.

RESEARCH PURPOSE

The purpose of the study is to examine the implications of the unadvertised and little known clause, which has allowed students to be admitted regardless of their HSC score if they pay up-front \$100 per credit point. It appears that no records are kept of the numbers of students who have taken advantage of the scheme and documentation of its rationale, underlying philosophy and history are not open for investigation. Specifically, this study will use a survey research methodology to determine the effects on a small group of volunteers, obtained through my personal network, of their involvement with the Centre For Open Learning. The intent of the study is not to generalise beyond the specific research sample.

If the responses to this scheme are positive, and the students results are at a pass level, there could be a case for expanding university admissions to encompass more students and more courses. By providing this information concurrently to institutions in different sectors of tertiary education, it may be possible to identify groups who might benefit from participation in these schemes but who currently are not applying, or not being successful in gaining admission. Budget pressures by higher education administrators and taxpaying public demand that we improve education by increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of existing resources, rather than by developing expensive new alternatives to improve education. This method allows each School and graduate School on campus to charge fees and thus it assists with their ongoing costs and allows them to purchase new equipment, if needed, that

would not otherwise be funded. As well as documenting the background characteristics of non-award students, there is a need for documentation of the types of problems these students experience. Some may relate to course structures, timetables, resources and facilities, while others may be of a more personal nature, such as lack of confidence, difficulties in allocating time to study and feelings of guilt. This could be one area in which an orientation program could be particularly beneficial. Interest in the area was stimulated by Simon Marginson's (1992) view that our most common technique of selection is profoundly pessimistic. Marginson maintains that our education system assumes that some students cannot be educated to a high standard, and thereby produces that outcome. The assumption that some students are likely to succeed when others are not, in fact, negates the value of good academic teaching and its potential to influence students. Obviously unsuitable applicants should be encouraged to come to a recognition of their own unsuitability rather than see themselves as rejected by the university. This paper presents a rationale for admissions offices in all campuses to employ an Open Admission System, to allow students who can successfully complete subjects (ie. attain certain competency levels) to gain recognition for their efforts and be able to credit subjects towards a Degree in any area .

It is intended to serve as a basis for subsequent and more specific research on questions of access to higher education.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Is the non-award enrolment scheme whereby students can accumulate subjects towards a degree being used as a mechanism for some students at Macquarie, who would have gained entry by no other means, to participate in university life and studies?
2. What types of students are applying and how did they obtain information about the course?
3. What particular difficulties, if any, are the students experiencing?
4. What are the particular hopes and aspirations of these students and what are their responses to the Centre for Open Learning?

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Permission was granted by the Ethics Review Committee, 16th September 1994 (Human Subjects), Macquarie University for the project to be conducted. The students were issued with a letter

of consent, which guaranteed anonymity and the right to withdraw at any time, the letter explained the purpose of the study and informed the students of their right to refuse to answer questions without prejudice. (see Appendix).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Martin Seligman's book, *Learned Optimism* (1994) provides the background in the area of psychology with his latest research on the shift of focus from the power of the environment to individual expectation, preference, choice, decision, control and helplessness. His studies (1994) on admissions policies and success rates of first year students found that a high correlation existed between those who believed they could succeed and grade-point averages of freshmen. He convinced the University of Pennsylvania's Dean of Admissions (Seligman, 1994) that the university was missing out on enrolling good students because SAT scores only were used as predictors.

During the late 1950's and 1960's there was a move in American higher education toward open admissions - an egalitarian philosophy which opened the doors of higher education to those who had not been considered "college material" (Manning 1986) Wilder and Somers (1983) describe the meaning of the term "open door" as being that the student regardless of his level of achievement, will receive the best education possible commensurate with his needs, efforts, motivation and abilities. This policy was practised by admissions officers in a large proportion of both private and public institutions during the 1960's in America. In Australia, tertiary institutions are faced with large numbers of applicants with a score that may not measure their true academic potential, or who lack an aggregate score altogether. There are also increasing concerns (Toomey R , 1987) about the narrow composition of the current higher education student population and about the way traditional selection procedures contribute to that narrowness. One of the first experiments with non-degree courses was conducted at Flinders University where it was felt in the early 80s that particular kinds of educational offerings by departments of continuing education could contribute significantly to the

objectives of participation and equity. Vic Beasley in his investigation entitled *Participation and Equity: The Flinders Experiment* (1986) argues that, "the provision of education for all comes per se, as in the way that it introduces people to university education and makes them realise that they are not excluded from it. "The writer envisages a range of courses designed "to enable people to discover their capacities for, and interest in, study at a university level".

At Flinders University there was provision within the University's Statutes which had some limited potential for widening access by way of non-degree studies. The relevant clause in the Calendar reads:

There shall be a category of non-matriculated students up to a cumulative limit of three such students in any discipline... who may be enrolled in a School...at the discretion of that School. (1985 p.vii)

Rosemary Osman in her Survey of Special Entry Schemes in Universities (1981 p.22) acknowledges the idea of Open Entry as giving students the right to know, and she promotes the idea of "self-selection".

RESEARCH DESIGN

1) Subjects

The sample size of eleven students represented all the known students who qualified to participate. Students were selected who satisfied the following criteria:

- * Inability to gain entry into a metropolitan university (which would allow them to live at home)

- * The desire to participate in university life on campus and obtain a university degree

- * Enrolment at Macquarie University's Centre For Open Learning with the purpose of taking single subjects and accumulating them into a degree after one year. All students were in the first or second year of their program. Eleven students have been identified, nine of whom were male. Three were from Taiwan, five were Australian born and three were South African students whose matriculation qualifications were not recognised by Australian Universities. None of the students was eligible for special entry-schemes.

2) Method and Limitations

Work as a high school careers adviser has enabled contact with students who have been grateful of the opportunity to participate in campus life through the non-award scheme. Students who matched the criteria were contacted but no records were available as to how many others were in the same situation. Therefore, it will be hard to generalise from these results as the university was not able to provide the relevant data at this stage. Another limitation is that it is impossible to know whether the sample represents the population of non-award

students who wish to accumulate their subjects, so an attempt to make inferences will be difficult. For this reason, I am using a group case-study methodology combined with the collection of other data (the non-award handbook) of policy making at

Macquarie University which will help provide insights into practical effects of such a scheme. Thus, the study will rely on a semi-structured qualitative methodology. Comparison studies in the area would be invalid, as it would be impossible to locate an identical group of students with the same characteristics apart from being non-award students. Invitations and letters of consent (see Appendix 1) were given to the volunteers that were identified through my personal network, to participate in a survey questionnaire. A questionnaire was used because it is a standardised measurement that is consistent across all respondents so that the responses of the individuals can be analysed on a reasonably comparable basis and conclusions drawn about the entire sample. The principal weakness of the method is that it obtains a lesser depth and quality of information than an in-depth interview. However, time constraints did not allow for face-to-face interviews.

3) Instrumentation

The questionnaire (Appendix 2) consisted of Likert-type questions, open ended and closed questions concerning; the advantages and disadvantages of studying in the non-awarded program; the problems of being a student who has achieved a lower cut-off than the required aggregate; and the future plans of such students. Progress of the students at the university was also noted as well as their response to gaining entry into a full degree program after one year. The questionnaire has been checked for validity by Professor Alan Lindsay, Academic Pro. Vice Chancellor, Macquarie University and Dr. Tony Koop - School Education and Work Macquarie University. Open-ended questions were used to give respondents the opportunity to identify issues which were not included in the structured part of the questionnaire and to add detail to the responses given. The open ended responses were subsequently coded to identify common themes. The Likert scales were used to determine the degree to which various issues presented problems to the respondents. The results were tabulated and the top two codes were combined and compared with the bottom two to check for significant differences. The indicators of collaboration used for data collection and data analysis were extracted mainly on a priori based on a review of the literature. The indicators formed coding categories for the data and were organised as a "conceptually clustered matrix" (Miles & Huberman, 1984, p.111) shown in Fig. 1. This method allows for responses

to a series of questions to be placed on one sheet. Reading across the rows gives a thumb nail profile of each informant, and reading down the columns enables comparisons between the participants.

RESULTS

PROFILE OF STUDENTS (See Fig. 1)

AGE: The average age of the eleven students was 19 years and 2 months which is consistent with the students being recent school leavers. Their ages ranged from 18 to 20.

SEX: There were 8 males and 3 females

PLACE OF BIRTH: Five of the students were born in Australia, three in South Africa and three in Taiwan.

FIRST LANGUAGE: English is the first language for eight of the students.

TER SCORE: Nine of the students had completed their HSC in

Australia and their average TER was 57.78. The lowest aggregate which gained entry to Arts in 1993 was 75.45, and for 1994 it was 62.35. The range was from 46.45 to 70.1. The student who obtained 70.1 had failed to gain entry because he had completed his university application form incorrectly.

CREDIT POINTS STUDIED THIS YEAR: One student misunderstood the question and only wrote the number he/she had completed. The others were all studying over 18 credit points, which is the minimum requirement to become a "regular" student the following year. Three students were completing 23, 24 and 25 credit points which indicates that they elected to take on additional subjects.

HOURS PER WEEK INVOLVED IN STUDIES: It can be assumed that the students had difficulty interpreting this question as to whether it included lecture hours, so no conclusions can be derived from their responses. All students were studying at least eleven hours per week.

REASONS FOR ENTERING THE NON-AWARD PROGRAM (See Fig.2)

KNOWLEDGE OF NON-AWARD PROGRAM: Eight of the students learned of the program from career consultations with me after hearing of my services through personal contacts. Not one student saw advertisements for the program in the media. Three students were told by friends, who had been informed by another careers adviser who learned of the scheme through the careers network.

ABILITY TO ENROL IN SUBJECTS OF THE STUDENT'S FIRST CHOICE: Nine students were able to choose from the non-award handbook subjects in which they could enrol without any problem. They

were automatically accepted. Two students responded "no", and the responses were, were not on the non-award listing, eg media subjects

* I did not satisfy the academic requirements for entry

The findings on Fig. 2 indicate that all students responded positively to the non-award program. One student added:

* Unsure of future employment, saw it as best way to have most options

Another wrote:

* It's good for more chance to learn more such as learn another language (Japanese), not just repeat high school work again.

EXPECTATIONS OF THE COURSE:

Seven of the responses referred to the desire to have a degree, with the opportunity of experiencing campus life. Also

* I was not 100% sure what I wanted to do as a profession so I thought this program would give me a choice.

PROBLEMS FACED BY STUDENTS:

With the small sample, all that can be concluded is that more than half found difficulties with the following sets of problems in the first few months (See Fig. 3).

* knowledge of required standard of work

* ability to achieve required standard of work

* ability to cope with workload

* feelings of being different from fellow students

PERFORMANCE AND SATISFACTION

PASSED ALL SUBJECTS: All the students, except for one, had

passed all their subjects. Thus they would be eligible to automatically enrol through the University Admissions Centre the following year. The student who obtained a CZ pass would have to obtain a credit pass to keep up his C average in order to become a "regular" student. The information provided on HSC subjects indicates that the students were opting for subjects they could handle.

ATTITUDES TO THE CENTRE FOR OPEN LEARNING: Eight of the students were complementary about the assistance received at the Centre. (see Fig. 4) Two did not answer the question, which could imply that they did not know what it was. Words such as, "useful" "supportive", "friendly" and "great" were used more than once. One student responded thus, demonstrating that she/he did not understand the question:

* one of friend tell me

PRESSURE TO MAINTAIN A "C" AVERAGE: (see Fig. 4) Ten students were conscious of this pressure and they indicated this with comments like

- * made me nervous (x4)
- * made me take my work seriously (x4)
- * ambitious and wary of falling behind in the work (x1)

The other student wrote:

- * no difference, I would hope to always be able to pass my subjects well.

HOPES AND ASPIRATIONS

FUTURE PLANS: All the students hoped to graduate within three years and their career plans were all different. They ranged from Human Resource Management, high school English teaching, media, psychology, further study (possibility engineering) to travel.

THE DIFFERENCES THIS COURSE MADE TO POST SCHOOL PLANS: The responses, when coded, all indicated that the students would not be on campus if it were not for the non-award program...

- * A big difference as I would otherwise have gone to TAFE
- * A major difference. I was not really sure what I was going to do if I did not go to University
- * It made a huge difference. If I did not know about the program I would not be at uni which would have serious implications for pursuing a career in Education.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The research project has demonstrated that there are students at Macquarie University who are taking advantage of the non-award program to accumulate subjects. All the students were very positive about the fact that they had been given the opportunity to study at a campus with other young people their age. The non-award program enabled them to make a "fresh start" with their studies, taking subjects which were more relevant and interesting for them. They were all grateful for the opportunity, which had often come about when they were unsure as to what their future would hold. The types of students in the project were those who had missed out on a place on campus generally because of their TER ranks, or the fact that their South African Matriculation was not recognised by other universities. They were keen and enthusiastic and did not experience any major problems, other than those which would be

speculated to be common for all first year students who do not know what to expect from their courses. A special orientation

program for these students could be beneficial to assist them in determining the standards required at a first year level. Sample assignments could be distributed, and study skills could be incorporated into the seminars. Information on the Centre for Open Learning should be distributed to High Schools for the benefit of senior students as all the respondents were not aware of the possibility of single subject enrolment before their career consultations. As one student comments:

- * University should send us more information about non-award and describe more about University and UAC office.

At a recent conference of Careers Advisers, not one adviser had any knowledge of the program. Yet when the students find out about the Centre for Open Learning, they are positive about the staff and the assistance given, including the information in the handbook. The study has demonstrated that in order to pass university courses the required aggregate for entry does not have to be a crucial factor. When given the opportunity to "self-select", the research sample took advantage of the non-award scheme and were able to accumulate single subjects into a degree program. The students themselves certainly felt that the program should be expanded to other campuses and courses, with statements like:

- * all people deserve an equal opportunity to advance their education and knowledge
- * it gives students a chance to redeem themselves after poor HSC results.

Certainly there is need for further research in the area of students accumulating subjects towards a degree. Whilst the sample for the study was too limited to be able to generalise conclusions, the implications concerning the possibility of allowing wider access to non-award programs are far - reaching.

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