

TAFE Child Care Graduates Begin a University Teaching Degree

Judith Dickson

Macquarie University

Abstract

This paper presents a study which investigated, described and analysed the variables that impacted on the first year university experience of a group of TAFE Child Studies graduates who enrolled in an Early Childhood teacher education degree. The group of students studied in this research represent but a small proportion of the rapidly growing cross sectoral movement of students between TAFE and post school providers and Australian universities. A number of academic and personal themes which appeared central to the first year transition of TAFE graduates were identified. By focussing on the student experience the research demonstrates that there are issues confronting transfer students which have not been previously researched and published.

All teacher education students, whether they are school leavers, mature age, international students or students with previous incomplete or complete tertiary qualifications or TAFE graduates are in transition during their first year in a tertiary institution. Tinto (1992, 1993) applied the notion of rites of passage first presented by Van Gennep (1960) to the three stage process by which students become integrated into the academic and social systems of a university. Tinto (1993) argued that new university students follow three stages of assimilation into the university: separation; transition and incorporation. As Tinto (1993, p. 99) contends most students " make their own way through the maze of institutional

life " and depend largely on other members of the community for support. Some students make significant personal contacts on their own while others need the assistance of formal structures to become involved in university.

Australian studies have demonstrated that the first year at the university for beginning students from a range of previous backgrounds is a period of adjustment or transition (Burns, Scott, Cooney & Gleeson, 1988; Burns, Davey, Hill & Leveson, 1992; Levine, 1986; Little, 1970; McInnis & James, 1994, 1995).

Previous studies of TAFE graduates have indicated that they experience transition difficulties in their first year, and in particular in the first semester (Burns et al., 1992; Ling & Devlin, 1993; Watson, Alder, Spicer & Emmersen, 1993; West, 1988). However studies of the university experience of the TAFE graduates have been limited and peripheral to the major research focus of the university performance of these graduates. Limited data on the background, process and outcome variables that impact on the TAFE graduate experience have been collected from short questionnaires and telephone surveys usually undertaken to add a human dimension to statistical data (Bardsley & Pauley, 1987; Burns et al., 1992; Hribar & Heazlewood, 1991; Ling & Devlin, 1994; Tennant, Dawes & Gowing, 1990; Watson et al., 1993; West, 1988). It is acknowledged that it is difficult to generalise from this student opinion data gathered in response to a range of written and oral surveys and questionnaires which were principally designed for another purpose. However from the minimal investigations cited above six recurring, overlapping variables impacting on the TAFE graduates' transition experience emerge. These variables are:

- theoretical knowledge expected at university in contrast to the applied and vocational knowledge required at TAFE (Hribar & Heazlewood, 1991; Trembath, Robinson & Cropley, 1992; West, 1988).
- differences in teaching and learning styles at TAFE and university (Burns et al., 1992; Hribar & Heazlewood, 1991; Ling & Devlin, 1993; Longworth, 1987; Parkinson, 1985; Pidgeon, 1995; Tennant et al., 1990; Trembath et al., 1996; Watson et al., 1993; West, 1988)
- higher academic standards and uncertainties of the level of expectations (Ling & Devlin, 1993; Parkinson, 1985; Tennant et al., 1990; Trembath et al., 1996)
- repetition of TAFE content (Dawes et al., 1993; Hribar & Heazlewood, 1991; Parkinson, 1985; Trembath et al., 1996)
- contrasts in staff - student interactions and relationships (Longworth, 1987; Ling & Devlin, 1993; Tennant et al., 1990; Trembath et al., 1996; West, 1988).
- time management difficulties combining study and other demands such as paid work and home and family responsibilities. (Hribar & Heazlewood, 1991; Trembath et al., 1996; West, 1988).

One of the first Australian credit transfer studies concluded that there has been little systematic evidence collected from the TAFE graduates in degree programs about their views and the variables that impact on their experiences (Bardsley & Pauley, 1987). Although the credit transfer literature was valuable, particularly in the performance and practice aspects, specific research of the variables that impact on TAFE graduates' experiences in their first year at university remained sparse. The literature that referred specifically to the transition experiences of TAFE graduates in early childhood degree programs was virtually non-existent.

Context

The present study was part of a larger longitudinal study (Dickson, 1999) which explored the TAFE to University transition experiences of twelve child care graduates who entered a three year full time on campus early childhood teacher education degree program in 1994. The degree consisted of a mix of compulsory core and elective units. Given the small size of the cohort it was possible to explore in depth the first year at university experiences of the TAFE graduates and the differences they perceived between TAFE and university. A variety of data collection strategies including a questionnaire, focus group meetings, and a series of interviews were used to gather the data.

One contextual factor was particularly relevant to the study. As a consequence of the credit granted for their TAFE study the student teachers faced the challenge of undertaking a second year core unit in language, literacy and literature in their first semester. In addition, in order to achieve a full time study load, several students elected to undertake units spread across two and sometimes three levels of the program which led to social isolation from other early childhood students and dependence on other TAFE graduates for support.

The Participants

The twelve TAFE graduates (Flo, Merryn, Kylie, Lyn, Jane, Robyn, Tamara, Brigid, Louise, Anita, Therese and Alison) shared several common background variables in terms of gender, age, cultural background and post school education. The students ranged in age

from 22 to 29 years and with one exception Flo were Australian born. Seven of the twelve students were first generation university students. With the exception of Flo, who completed her secondary schooling in Malaysia, the students had attended secondary schools in Sydney. The ten students who completed their Higher School Certificate (HSC) self reported a mean Tertiary Entrance Score (TER) of 25.5, a final year score some 40 points lower than school leavers in their university entry cohort. Lyn who completed her secondary education at the Year 10 School Certificate level gained entry to the TAFE program on the basis of work experience.

All twelve students had completed an NSW TAFE Associate Diploma in Social Science (Child Studies) program which was designed to prepare para professional staff to work in a variety of children's services, other than in the formal school sector, which catered for children aged from birth to 12 years. All of the students had engaged in paid employment before enrolling in the University. Ten of the students had used their TAFE background to work in the child care industry predominantly in the long day care sector. Two students, Alison and Robyn, had elected to work part time in restaurants rather than in child care.

The Results

In first semester the TAFE graduates experienced difficulties adjusting to the organisational and academic expectations of university study. The students

were confronted with adaptation issues at the unit, faculty and university levels. Some of these issues were generic in origin and common to many beginning university students. However, for two reasons associated with the program undertaken by the participants, the issues were heightened.

- The former TAFE students encountered adjustment issues not in first year units units like most beginning students but in a difficult second year unit and in some third year units.
- The majority of the other students in the second year unit and all of the third year students had completed at least one year of study at university.

Overall, nine specific administrative, academic and environmental variables that impacted on the TAFE graduates' first semester experience were identified from the data. The variables were:

- orientation to university facilities particularly the library;
- adaptation to different styles of teaching and learning;
- adjusting to the level and expectations of assignments;
- mastering the mechanics of assignment construction;
- assessing progress towards assignment expectations;
- establishing appropriate staff- student interactions;
- lack of contact with students undertaking the regular program;
- the importance of support by their fellow TAFE graduates

- minimal use of on campus student support services.

Orientation to University Facilities particularly the Library.

In the first few weeks of the semester the TAFE graduates needed to learn to use the Library. It appears from the students' comments that these organisational procedures were not explained in the second and third year units in which they were enrolled where staff seemed to have assumed this organisational knowledge. Jane described how:

It was quite overwhelming actually. Just little things. You're not sort of told of little things that you've got to do. Little things, going to buy your library photocopying card and peculiar things that you are left to your own devices, you've got to find out. It's not given to you. I'm actually wondering though whether I did one a second year subject.

Adaptation to Different Styles of Teaching and Learning

From the beginning of the semester the students realised that the styles of teaching and learning were different at university than at TAFE. The basic delivery format in the core unit was two one hour lectures each week for 11 weeks given by the five members of the teaching team. The TAFE graduates quickly realised that at university they had to take responsibility for managing their own learning. Tamara, who had completed TAFE the previous year noted the differences between TAFE and university in terms of personal responsibility for her learning. Writing in the second week of classes she noted that:

TAFE students really need to know all about the Uni course before they actually start and they also need to be really independant[sic] in studying, reading texts and writing essays before uni. starts. At Tech. we were all spoon fed, told what to learn etc. and Uni, you need to be really independant [sic] & keep really up to date with all your work, readings etc.

Adjusting to the Level and Expectations of Assignments

The first assignment in the core unit was the students' first major university assignment. The students were apprehensive about, and unsure of, the standard of work expected in the second year level unit. Knowledge of the high failure rate in the unit in previous years (Dickson, Fleet & Watt, 2000), combined with an awareness that most other students in the unit had completed first year units heightened their anxiety. Anita wrote about: " *knowing what is expected* " and Jane of the " *high expectations of work submitted means it needs a lot of work and therefore needing careful time management planning* ".

Mastering the Mechanics of Assignment Construction

Four aspects of the mechanics of assignment construction that particularly concerned the TAFE graduates were: library research; analysing and interpreting assignment material and questions; the development of an appropriate writing style; and the correct use of the mandatory American Psychological Association (APA) referencing guidelines.

Jane spoke about " *the preparation and the library work and all that sort of stuff which is an important part of the assignment* ". Louise commented on " *doing research and assignments and going to the library and all the Readings* ". Lyn wanted assistance with " *report writing and analysing* ". She described this activity as " *making critical thinking this sort of thing- it's big at Uni.* ". The development of appropriate writing skills also concerned the students. As Merryn put it: " *at first I was very unsure about my style of writing and the level of work that was required. My assignment required a great deal of review before a final product was handed in*".

The TAFE graduates were unsure of the referencing procedures. Brigid wrote:

" *since I'm doing all 200 level courses [sic] I wasn't introduced to any expectations[sic] of the courses [sic] ie, referencing system* ". Louise said : " *it's more strict in certain ways compared to TAFE, like referencing* ".

Assessing Progress Towards Assignment Expectations

The return of the first assignment late in the semester provided the first opportunity for the students to assess their progress both towards the standards expected in the unit and against the performance of their peers. Seven of the twelve TAFE graduates failed the first assignment. These results increased their anxieties as they were aware that for several years the unit had recorded a consistently high failure rate (Dickson et al, 2000)

The students, who had achieved higher than average grades at TAFE, were disappointed with their grades in the first assignment and found it difficult to accept that their marks were poor. Brigid was upset by the mark she received for her assignment and she reported that " *I think my first assignment I got back was a slight shock because I am used to getting As and I think I passed by about three marks, and I was rather devastated* ".

Establishing Appropriate Staff- Student Interactions

In general the TAFE graduates appeared reluctant to approach academic staff for support with unit content and the preparation of and feedback on assignments. They gave several reasons for this reluctance.

- Hesitancy about the appropriate staff member to approach. This situation was, as Alison commented, in direct contrast to TAFE. She remembered : " *at TAFE you have the same teachers. You're in a class of 30 all the time. You're in that stable class. Yes, you have the same teachers* ".
- Concerns about the conventions in approaching staff. Louise observed : " *I didn't feel that they really wanted to be bothered with students asking them about assignments, so I was a little bit hesitant in asking* ".
- The perceived impersonality of the institution and the large number of students in the unit which made it difficult for staff to provide individual attention. Roslyn commented: " *That's something I've noticed the difference too with TAFE compared to here. Here you are like a number, whereas at TAFE because it's a lot smaller, you're known by your name* " .

Lack of Contact with Regular Program Students

A number of participants reported a gulf between them and the rest of the early childhood students. Louise wrote that she " *found it difficult breaking into the cliché [sic] of previous groups* ". Similarly, Robyn noted that she was " *looked upon strangely in the 200 level subject because a lot of the class has been together before in the previous year* " .

Even given the small group sizes, in the third year units the TAFE graduates still experienced difficulties making contact with the other students and the social gap between them and the other students appeared to be even greater than at second year level. Therese vividly described her experience in her third year Drama class: " *They didn't take the time to even know you, because they have got their own little groups* " .

Reliance on Fellow TAFE Graduates for Support

At informal meetings for early childhood advanced standing students, initial contacts between TAFE students were made. The students acknowledged the origins of their support group . As Tamara recalled: " *I think that's from the first group meeting or just when we enrolled and I think we just got talking and stuff like that* " . Merryn also reported that at: " *the meetings. We all get together. That's good, and we sort of built a little network out of that anyway* " .

Four other factors also drew the TAFE graduates together.

- As a group they were slightly older than the students in the regular cohort, a difference that the TAFE graduates were aware of and found difficult to bridge. Alison said " *there is like an age gap* " .
- The students had already gained a common early childhood qualification through TAFE study. Louise wrote: " *I found that talking to advanced standing students has been a bonus as we have all been in the same boat. ie. we studied at TAFE* " .
- The students all had child care industry experience. Even Robyn, one of the students without paid industry experience explained that incidents at work often formed a conversational base. She said:

I've probably stuck with them [the TAFE graduates] because we're all in the same sort of situation, and we have some common experiences and we've been in Centres [day care centres] so that people talk about Centres that they have actually worked in and been to before and things that have happened.

- The TAFE graduates' program as a result of the credit granted was different from that of other early childhood students. As Tamara put it " *we always had to do things separately to everyone else* " .

Minimal Use of Student Support Services

Despite the difficulties they faced in gauging university expectations and in completing satisfactory assignments, the students seemed unaware of the student support facilities that were available on campus. This was despite the publicity material that had been distributed at enrolment and at the informal meetings. Merryn, wrote: " *I don't know what services there are* " and " *I haven't used any, don't really know much about them* " .

Discussion

The general first semester experiences of the TAFE graduates in this study were similar to those reported in previous research (Trembath et al., 1996 ; West, 1988). From the first week of teaching they were faced with difficulties that are usually associated with a student's first year at university (Boddy & Neale, 1998; McInnis & James, 1995; Peel, 1996; Tindle, 1998). Like TAFE students in previous studies (Parkinson, 1985) and first year university students in general

(McInnis & James, 1995) the students in this study were apprehensive about their academic preparedness, the amount of work involved and the seemingly open ended nature of the work.

These uncertainties were heightened for the students in this study as the credit granted for their TAFE qualification placed them in a challenging second year core unit which had the reputation as being difficult. Several academic and environmental variables associated with the core unit in particular caused them unusual stress.

- A considerable part of the content in the core unit was concerned with concepts that had not been part of their TAFE program and the students felt underprepared for the task. Moreover, the assignments required levels of conceptual understanding, analysis and synthesis which are normally developed gradually throughout the first year of university (Ballard & Clancy, 1988; Krause, 1998; Peel, 1996).
- Several research studies have noted the perception amongst TAFE graduates that some university staff treated them condescendingly and were unavailable to help students (Longworth, 1987; Trembath et al., 1996; West, 1988). Students in this study showed this perception with some reporting that academic staff either seemed unaware of their presence in their on campus units or alternatively labelled them as former " *TAFE students* " (Brigid).
- The students in this study had limited support from fellow early childhood students undertaking the regular program. By entering higher level units in their first year of university study they found themselves on the periphery of second and third year groups.
- By not studying the full semester load with any one cohort in a tightly structured degree the TAFE graduates missed out on the apparently trivial but critical conversations that student cohorts tend to have outside of scheduled classes. Students in this study, therefore, had a qualitatively different experience from students who commenced a prescribed full time program in first year.

International research (Astin, 1993; Cohen & Hoberman, 1983; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Pascarella, Terenzini & Wright, 1982; Terenzini, 1993 ; Tinto, 1992, 1993) and local research (Clulow & Brennan, 1996; Dalzeil & Peat, 1998; McKavanagh, O'Connor & West, 1996) has pointed to the importance of peer group support and interactions in students' cognitive and affective development. Research has shown that peer groups such as the group of TAFE graduates appear to buffer the stress of the transition process for students (Cohen & Hoberman, 1993).

The TAFE graduate group drawn, together by the advanced standing meetings, as well as by age and common experiences undoubtedly provided social and emotional support to its members. The TAFE base of the group, however made it somewhat exclusive and inward looking and in addition probably limited the extent of academic support provided from within

the group to its members. It must be acknowledged, however, that the informal meetings provided specific opportunities for the students to meet. To some extent, these meetings, and in particular the formation of the informal network of TAFE graduates, influenced the first semester experience of this group of students.

Although it has been suggested that the use of student services generally enhances the student experience and helps to prevent attrition (Clark, 1989; Gallagher, 1992; Promitz & Germain, 1996; Student Services Australia, 1993; Tindle, 1998) studies of Australian students have revealed a generally low usage of student support services by students (Gallagher, 1992; Lee, Gelonesi, Jolly & Kench, 1998; McInnis & James, 1995;). This study is no different: the TAFE graduates in this study did not take advantage of the advertised student support services. **Conclusion**

The TAFE graduates' experience in their first semester at university was very different from the norm, even of other transition students. In their first semester they had to separate themselves from the academic framework of TAFE, orientate themselves and make the transition to university expectations among other students who had already adapted to the culture of the institution. In addition, while facing these transitional difficulties, the TAFE graduates found themselves on the periphery of early childhood year groups because of their non standard program of studies.

Acknowledgement

The author wish to acknowledge the willingness of the student teachers to share their experiences. Pseudonyms have been used to preserve their anonymity. The author also wishes to acknowledge the supervision of Professor George Cooney and Associate Professor Pamela Warton in the preparation of the doctoral thesis a small part of which has been reported on in this paper.

REFERENCES

- Astin, A. W. (1983). Strengthening transfer programs. In G. B. Vaughan & Associates (Eds.), *Issues for community college leaders in a new era* (pp.122-138). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Astin, A. W. (1993). *What matters in college? Four critical years revisited*. San-Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Ballard, B., & Clanchy, J. (1988). Literacy in the university: An anthropological approach. In G. Taylor, B. Ballard, V. Beasley, H. Bock, J. Clancy & P. Nightingale. (Eds.), *Literacy by degrees*(pp. 7-23). Milton Keynes: SRHE and Open University Press.
- Dickson, J. A. (1999) *TAFE child care graduates go to university: Their first year experience*. Unpublished PhD thesis, Macquarie University, Sydney
- Dickson, J., Fleet, A., & Watt, H. (in press). Success or failure in a core university unit: What makes the difference? *Higher Education Research and Development*.
- Gallagher, M. (1992). Student services: The view from DEET. *Journal of Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association*, 4, 9 - 23.
- Hribar, Q., & Heazlewood, T. (1991). *TAFE credit transfer: A case study*. Wagga Wagga, NSW: Charles Sturt University, Riverina.
- Hunter, S. (1990). Student perceptions of the first year experience. In G. Mullins (Ed.), *Breaking the mould* (pp. 202 - 204). Sydney: Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia.
- Kasworm, C. E. (1990). Adult undergraduates in higher education :A perspective of past research perspectives. *Review of Educational Research*, 60 (3),345-372.
- Krause, K. L. (1998). Writing assignments in the first year: Student perceptions and strategies for survival. In *Proceedings of the third Pacific Rim Conference of First Year in Higher Education*. Vol.1.Auckland NZ. Auckland Institute of Technology.
- Lee, G., Gelonesi, B., Jolly, N., & Kench, P. (1998). The first year experience questionnaire and evaluation of strategies to facilitate student transition to university. In *Proceedings of the Third Pacific Rim Conference of First Year in Higher Education*. Vol.II. Auckland, NZ: Auckland Institute of Technology.
- Levine, J. (1986). *The first year experience: A report upon a consultation with the students and staff of the Flinders University of South Australia*. Canberra: Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission.
- Lewis, D. E. (1991). *Credit transfers between TAFE and higher education*. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.
- Ling, P., & Devlin, M. (1993). *Transfer shock? EQARD*. Occasional Paper, 94 (2). Melbourne: Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology.

- Longworth, W.R.(1987). *The interface between TAFE and advanced education in engineering*. Canberra: CTEC
- McInnis, C., & James, R. (1994). *The first year experience: Responding to diversity*. Canberra: Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia.
- McInnis, C., & James, R. (1995). *First year on campus: Diversity in the initial experiences of Australian undergraduates*. Committee for the Advancement of University Teaching. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.
- McKavanagh, M., Connor, J., & West, J. (1996). " It's moments like these you need mentors ". In C. McInnis & R. James (Eds.), *Transition to active learning* (pp.303-314). Melbourne: Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne.
- Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (1991). *How college affects students: Findings and insights from twenty years of research*. San Francisco: Jossey- Bass.
- Peel, M. (1996). Studying the transition from year twelve to the first year of university. In C. McInnis & R. James (Eds.), *Transition to active learning*. Melbourne: Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne.
- Pidgeon, J. (1996). Swinburne University of Technology: Survey of students in higher education with prior TAFE studies,1994. In R. Trembath, C. Robinson, & M. Cropley. *An analysis of credit transfer in Victoria's dual sector institutions* (pp.38-39). Office of Training and Further Education, Department of Education, Victoria.
- Promnitz, J., & Germain, C. (1996) *Student support services and academic outcomes: Achieving positive outcomes*. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.
- Student Services Australia (1993). *Student support services: Management, delivery and effectiveness*. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.
- Tennant, M., Dawes, L., & Gowing, B. (1990). *Students transferring from TAFE to higher education: A case study*. Sydney: University of Technology.
- Terenzini, P. T. (1993). *The transition to college: Easing the passage*. University Park, PA: National Centre on Post Secondary Teaching, Learning and Assessment
- Tindle, E. (1998, August). On becoming an undergraduate: Transition to university. *Guidance Information Bulletin*. Brisbane: Career, Course and Guidance Information Services Unit, Education Queensland.
- Tinto, V. (1992). Student attrition. In B. R. Clarke & G. R. Neave (Eds.), *The encyclopedia of higher education* (pp. 1731 - 1745). Oxford: Permagon.
- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd Ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Trembath, R., Robinson, C., & Cropley, M. (1996). *An analysis of credit transfer in Victoria's dual sector institutions*. Victoria: Office of Training and Further Education, Department of Education.



Watson, D., Alder, J., Spicer, S., & Emmerson, G. (1993). *Articulation / credit transfer: Learning styles and academic performance*. Melbourne: Victorian University of Technology

West, A. (1988). *Performance and problems encountered by students transferring from TAFE to higher education*. Unpublished M. Ed. Admin. thesis, University of New England, Armidale, NSW.