StoriesAs Perspectivesand Interests: Approachesand Issuesin Conceptualising StudentAttrition andRetention atCentral QueenslandUniversity

Don Bowser*, P. A. Danaher* and Jay Somasundaram^

*Division of Teaching and Learning Services

^Office of the Registrar and Chief Compliance Officer

Central Queensland University

Introduction

- Part of a broader project investigating constructions of student attrition and retention at CQU.

- Focus on stories understood as analogies, perspectives and interests.

- Stories are highly informative about the drivers of, and the responses to, learning from change about attrition and retention.

Method

- Intensive, semi-structured, tape-recorded conversation among the authors on 17 January 2005.

- Questions/Discussion focused on:

  - what attrition is

  - whether there is an acceptable and/or a necessary level of attrition

  - what the individual and institutional causes of and responsibilities for attrition might be

  - which strategies might be effective at promoting retention and why they might be effective.

Method

- Analysis of tape-recorded conversation deployed Rowan's (2001) transformative approach to textual and thematic analysis.

- This approach highlights the explicit and implicit elements of what is present and included in texts.

- This approach also emphasises the gaps and silences of what is excluded from texts.

- Our analysis generated a number of thematically clustered reflections on the contents of the conversation.

Wepropose toexplore twoof the questionsat thisseminar, using someof the 'stories' fromour paperto generatediscussion:

- Whether there is an acceptable and/or a necessary level of attrition (Jay)
- What the individual and institutional causes of and responsibilities for attrition might be (Don)

Acceptabilityand Levels

Is there an acceptable and/or a necessary level of attrition?.

Acceptabilityand Levels

Economists talk about full employment, and a tolerable range, but these days we're very excited if we can get it to five per cent…, and it makes me wonder whether there's an analogy between attrition and unemployment – whether there is an optimum level of attrition ….

Acceptabilityand Levels

Selected crude institutional attrition rates:

National Institute of Dramatic Art	0.6%
Aust. Film, Television and Radio School	1.0%
The University of Melbourne	10.9%
The University of Queensland	16.1%
Central Queensland University	23.6%
University of the Sunshine Coast	30.2%
Batchelor	42.6%

(2002 figures from Table 1a: Crude student attrition rates for all domestic students by State and Institution, 1994-2002 (%), Strategic Analysis and Evaluation Group Research Note No. 1 March 2004 Higher Education Attrition Rates 1994-2002: A Brief Overview. Available at http://www.dest.gov.au/research/publications/research_notes/1.pdf on 22 Feb. 2005).

Acceptabilityand Levels

Selected completion rates by Field of Study:

Selected completion rates by Field of Study:

Veterinary Science		89.8%	
Health			78.5%
Nursing		75.2%	
Education		71.4%	
Business, Administration, Economics	62.5%		
Engineering, Surveying		58.8%	
Arts, Humanities and Social Science	58.4%		
Science		58.3%	

(1993 cohort from Table 2: Predicted probability of completion, 1992 and 1993 cohorts, Undergraduate
Completion Rates: An update (internet only publication), Yew May Martin, Maureen Maclachlan,
Tom Karmel, Occasional Paper, Higher Education Group, Department of Education, Science and
Training, December 2001 Available at
http://www.dest.gov.au/archive/highered/occpaper/01f/default.htm on 22 Feb. 2005).

Acceptabilityand Levels

…while in theory a five per cent unemployment rate may be good for the economy, it is bad socially and, just as [a] five per cent attrition rate may be acceptable to maintain academic standards, it has negative consequences for the students [involved]…

Acceptabilityand Levels

Attrition and Retention statistics are based on the assumption that the optimum solution for students is graduation …

And it's not necessarily so. One term here could be just enough to…help [the individual] identify what they want to do, where they want to go…

Acceptabilityand Levels

…has the return for the student been optimised?
That's the real question. Attrition statistics are
saying it has not been optimised….

… every attrition statistic represents some type of
problem. The magnitude of the loss varies quite a
lot.

Causesand Responsibilities

..instead of just looking at students' academic performance and saying, "Right, you're in we need a far more thorough consultation process for those students who we might feel are potential attrition statistics and make sure that we at least monitoring and assisting them along the way….That's where the medical analogy comes in: the development of a fairly heavy consultation and having some steps along the way …before they actually do go to surgery.

Causesand Responsibilities

- the university has a duty of care towards students that extends to providing full information and conducting thorough consultations; and that ethics underpin the university's approach to attrition.

- and in a sense there's a relationship of the parent–child between the institution and the individual that comes to mind as well….providing…as much information as possible,…but also providing the support…

Causesand Responsibilities

…we also have a social obligation to ensure that, when those people come to the gate and we let them through, they are as well-informed as possible, because if we don't and they go back not having graduated with low self-esteem…, we are then letting the community down…

Causesand Responsibilities

…Sometimes by addressing attrition we can actually be delaying the student's decision to withdraw so we the university could actually be costing the student money – as well as the student's own self-esteem being damaged by the delay in the decision to withdraw, we could actually be hitting the pocket as well.

Causesand Responsibilities

…So it's this interplay between the individual and the institution,…and the institution might engage in those attrition strategies that actually prolong the pain and cause more debt from a mixture of reasons. One might be an altruistic kind of thing – "We want to help this person, we have a commitment to the region and so on" – and another might be less altruistic: "…Our economic interests are centred on… keeping this student here."

Possiblyprovocative reflectivequestions

- (Why) does it matter whether there are different possible definitions of 'student attrition'?
- Does/Should ethics have a place in deciding whether a certain level is acceptable and/or necessary?
- How far is it feasible and appropriate for CQU to go in seeking to reduce attrition?
- What are the most effective strategies at promoting retention likely to be?

Conclusion

- Attrition and retention are far more complex and significant phenomena than a simple measuring activity and trying to establish the reasons for students not completing their study.

- Such reasons must be situated in the broader interplay of socioculturally and ethically grounded understandings and aspirations about the purposes and impact of universities in the early 21st century.

Thankyou foryour timeand attention