**Learning in a new cultural context.**

**Regional students’ voices, views and experiences**

This presentation reports some early findings on the experiences of students enrolled in Vocational Education and Training (VET) courses in early childhood education and care who are recent arrivals in Australia and who are living in remote or regional towns. The main focus of the research is to understand the challenges faced by students adjusting to a new cultural and educational context with the view to better targeting student support services. The research was generated by recent shifts in student demographics in the CQUniversity footprint and specifically, increasing course enrolments for early childhood education and care students transitioning to Australian English and who are new arrivals in Australia. This shifting pattern of enrolment was generated by the strong demand for qualified early childhood educators in remote and regional Australia fuelled, in part, by the ‘resource boom’ in some regional communities.

Enrolments within Certificate and Diploma early childhood education and care courses in Central Queensland indicated increasing numbers of students from countries such as the Philippines, Thailand, India, Pakistan, China, Nepal and Fiji. In most cases, students had moved to regional communities with a partner who was working or seeking employment in the resource industry or in agriculture such as fruit picking or other farm labour. Typically, communities in regional and remote Queensland have high unemployment (although employment levels spiked with the mining boom) and low school completions. Paradoxically, given high unemployment, but not surprisingly given low school completion rates and community isolation, there tends to be employment shortages in professional areas such as health care and education- and more recently in engineering and related technical fields. Hence, during the resource boom regional areas have drawn workers from outside the local area including from overseas.

Informal conversations with VET early childhood students, assessment outcomes and observations of workplace practices indicated students who were recent arrivals in Australia, especially if English was a new or additional language faced a range of personal and academic challenges that impacted on course progression.

**The present study**

The main purpose of this study is to explore ‘what works’ in facilitating students’ engagement with and progression in a Certificate III or Diploma course in early childhood education and care. Our experience indicated there were now larger numbers of Certificate III and Diploma students from language backgrounds other than English than had been the case a decade ago and these students constituted a significant proportion of course enrolments. Students lived in remote and regional communities and were enrolled in a Distance Education mode. Most were already employed in the child care sector on a part-time or full-time basis.

Our goal is to better understand students’ contexts and experiences and to provide appropriately targeted support for learning to ensure timely progression and course completion. We have a deep conviction about the importance of a well-qualified early childhood education workforce and the need for regional and remote communities, which often cater for the most vulnerable children and families, to have the best early childhood educators (Elliott, 2006; Elliott & Keenan, 2009).

Since the introduction of the National Quality Framework (NQF) in January 2012, all educators in early childhood centres (within scope) must have a relevant, formal early childhood education qualification of at least Certificate III level. While there are some transition requirements and ‘waivers’, early childhood education centres require a complement of qualified educators and this has created strong demand for staff and shortages in some areas (Productivity Commission, 2014). Simultaneously, shortages of skilled professionals such as nurses, medical practitioners and engineers in traditionally ‘hard to staff’ communities have generated employment opportunities. Growth and labour shortages in mining and related trade areas or rural and farm work have attracted immigrant or work-approved families to regional and remote areas.

Many, if not most early childhood educators enrolled in a VET early childhood qualification do so while working and study by Distance Education (Watson, 2006). Most practical competencies are verified on the job by a third party, usually a key practitioner in the centre and/or by a visiting VET teacher/assessor. Nationally, recent evidence indicates that completion rates for Distance Education students tend to be low- sometimes as low as 7%. Completion rates for early childhood education and care courses (between 2004 and 2011) across all study modes were about 50% (Halliday-Wynes, Gemici & Stanwick, 2014).

The increasing number of CQUniversity VET students for whom English is an additional language is relatively recent. Presently, about 70 to 80% of enrolments in early childhood Certificate III courses have arrived in Australia in the last decade and come from homes where English is not the first language. Nationally, one in five students enrolled in a certificate or diploma course in early childhood education is from a non-English speaking background (Halliday-Wynes, Gemici & Stanwick, 2014). Enrolment of such students is not particularly unusual but the increased enrolments in the CQ footprint were noticeable. Importantly, VET students from English as an additional language background are not homogeneous and we felt that better understanding students’ motivations and learning needs might ensure better pedagogy, greater student satisfaction and stronger completion rates.

While most students accessing VET Distance Education courses in regional communities probably experience study challenges, informal conversations with students fromEnglish as additional language backgrounds in early childhood courses indicated that some experiences and issues were different from those experienced by local students. Our sense was that these challenges centred around competing family and work demands, motivation and study expectations, and difficulties with Standard Australian English (SAE) for academic purposes. Further, it became apparent these students’ previous education backgrounds tended to be different from those of local students. Many of the students had previous professional work experience and/or higher education qualifications, whereas local students tended to be early school leavers. Incidental conversations with students indicated that recent arrivals recognised the early childhood qualification as a prerequisite to gain work in an area of demand, but in a tight employment context. At the same time, there was some indication that they saw a VET course as a ‘soft’ entry point to Australian higher education and/or a pathway to additional employment-relevant qualifications. Further, there was growing anecdotal evidence from VET teachers that many students were ‘struggling’ to complete course work and submit assessment tasks and that some were taking far longer than was reasonable to complete their course. In the longer term, we expect that some VET graduates will transition to teaching degrees so insights into potential students’ experiences might enable us to support them better during this process.

**Strategies for enhancing progression and completion in VET**

The low progression and completion rates in VET have long been of concern to policy makers (*Training for early childhood education and care in Australia,* 2015). The literature indicates a range of strategies deemed successful at increasing student progression and retention in vocational education courses both in Australian VET and elsewhere, such as in the community colleges in the USA (Mangan, 2015; Nodine, Venezia & Bracco, 2011). Many students experience barriers to study, usually around economic insecurity and family and work and/or cultural commitments (Rothman et al., 2013). The literature indicates consistently, that focused and targeted strategies to improve students’ course selection and expectations of study, the effectiveness of employment-based experiences and assessment practices, together with mentoring and student support services are most effective in reducing attrition. In the early childhood sector, factors around poor image and low pay in child care may also contribute to motivation and progression within courses (Elliott, 2006; Productivity Commission, 2013b, 2014; Watson, 2006). Staff turnover in early childhood services is high and as people leave the industry they also abandon study. In the case of VET study in Australia, a matrix of factors around motivation and expectations, coupled with student experiences and the goodness of fit between course selection, career goals and personal experiences and events appear to impact on progression and attrition (Halliday, Wynes, Gemici & Stanwick, 2013; Watson, 2006; Callan, 2005). To date though, there is little or no information on the VET study experiences of the unique group of students who are the subject of this study, yet as Wilcoxson et al., (2011) suggest, institutions appear to have specific profiles in terms of student progression.

**Participants and method**

The data reported in this paper are drawn from interviews with 10 CQUniversity students enrolled in the Certificate III or Diploma in Early Childhood Education and Care for whom English is an additional language and who have lived in Australia for less than 10 years. The students are part of a much larger cohort of regional students enrolled in early childhood education and care qualifications. While there is a CQUniversity campus in major centres such as Mackay and Rockhampton, there is no campus in outlying towns such as Blackall, Dysart, Glenden, Clermont, Barcaldine, Blackwater, Winton and Capella- all areas that experienced significant population growth during the resource boom. Students in these communities seeking an early childhood qualification must generally enrol in a distance education mode - either with CQUniversity or a commercial Registered Training Organisation (RTO). In Emerald, while there is a CQU campus, it does not offer early childhood qualifications. There is some targeted CQUniversity funding that enables a VET teacher to visit communities to meet with students on a one-to-one basis, run group workshops, visit workplaces and undertake assessments.

Participants were contacted via course lecturers and were interviewed in their workplaces during work breaks or at a regional campus ‘hub’. Interviews were open ended with questions focusing on previous education background, motivation for enrolment, family/cultural, work status and experience, study experiences and navigating study/ work/family demands, and perceptions of what helps or would help support their on-going study. Interview questions drew on six sets of variables implicated in early childhood education students’ progression and retention (Elliott, 1996; Elliott, 2002):

(1) student background characteristics, such as personal wellbeing, family and work commitments, socio-economic status, and financial considerations; (2) pre-tertiary experiences and achievements; (3) vocational goals and commitment; (4) academic adjustment and expectations; (5) work and home influences; and (6) student mentoring and support services.

The main goal of the interviews was to better understand the socio-cultural context of students’ study situation, ways we could support their study and increase course completions, challenges to study and especially issues that around adjusting to the new Australian education context. Participants’ career goals and plans were of interest in terms of early childhood workforce issues in regional and remote communities and possible transition to degree level courses in early childhood teaching. Each interview lasted about 20 to 30 minutes.

**Students’ experiences**

*Student background characteristics including previous education*The 10 female students interviewed in the first phase study had moved to their communities with a partner working or seeking work in a health, resource, education or agricultural occupation. In most cases they expected their residence in the regional/remote community to be short term ranging for two to ten years. Most students (n=7) held previous overseas degree level qualifications, four in teaching, that were either not recognised in Australia and/or there was no relevant work in their regional area. In addition, most students had young children and also wanted to spend time with their children. They recognised that early childhood work can offer flexibility by virtue of its part-time or casual nature and the opportunity to take their own child to work. Three students had no previous higher education qualifications. Students were generally fluent in spoken English but indicated challenges around academic writing generally and using English for academic writing.

Analyses of interview data indicated four intersecting influences that seemed to most impact course experience and progression- motivation to study, academic expectations, student support and most importantly, home and family commitments.

*Motivation for study and academic expectations* *and vocational goals and commitment* For all students, the major reason for undertaking the course was to gain or retain employment in a child care centre. In almost all cases students said that child care offered the only possibility of employment that was ‘professional’ in nature and further, with the additional benefit of being aligned with their own children’s care needs. Each student indicated that child care offered the best employment prospects in the community for someone without local work experience- and was aligned with their ‘interests’ and to an extent their expertise in parenting, if not their previous career or study. While bigger communities might offer employment options for people with no or unrecognised qualifications, smaller communities have few such employment options and if they do they tend to be ‘reserved’ for locals.

In most cases, having young children provided some affinity with and experience in child care and development, even for those with unrelated qualifications (such as law or IT)- and this alignment, together with the realities of the job situation were key factors motivating student ‘interest’ in early childhood education.

Students were initially alerted to opportunities in the early childhood sector by ‘word of mouth’. They heard about child care employment options from friends and acquaintances, and later, about relevant courses from employers and colleagues. Although all participants recognised the low pay and status of child care they were ‘grateful’ to have the opportunity to work and to improve their employment options by studying a relevant qualification. In most cases, because of participants’ previous educational backgrounds, they had not previously considered working in child care. Most mentioned the much greater opportunities for study in Australia than in their home countries and they valued the fee assistance and/or fee-less structure of their course. These students had benefited from the government’s fee-free initiative for VET courses in early childhood education during 2012-2014 which carried over into 2015 for continuing students.

*Student mentoring and support* Overwhelmingly, students with a previous degree level qualification found the course content ‘easy’ and ‘straightforward’. They also found it ‘interesting’, ‘enlightening’ and ‘fascinating’. All indicated that structural and pedagogical approaches were much less formal and more ‘casual’ than their previous degree level study in home countries. The competency-based tasks with an emphasis on practical skills were substantially different from the more ‘academic’ and theoretical work in their previous study, but according to students, these differences did not impede progress. Once they ‘worked out the formula’ for providing responses in the ‘workbooks’ they were able to complete the written work quite easily. However, the actual reading and writing tasks tended to be challenging as most students were in the process of developing academic writing skills and conventions in English. Not surprisingly, much of the content, context and terminology was new to them. Overall, they felt the course work was less academically challenging than in their previous study – but this was not unexpected given the differences in conceptual underpinnings and volume of learning in a degree level course, plus the different, more ‘rigid’ (their words) structure of teaching in their home countries. They found the more ‘individualised’ VET approach to study much more ‘relaxed’ and ‘flexible’ than in their home countries.

While content *per se* was not considered difficult, students were less confident about ‘college processes’ and requirements in terms of specific written assessments and about procedures around course completion and certification. They were mystified about the operation of CQUniversity and the lack of ‘formal communication’ about enrolment, library use, study assistance, internet access, future study pathways and matters relating to course administration. This, they said, was quite different from their previous study experiences where services, requirements and expectations were specified very clearly. For example, students were unaware of library resources and internet access protocols for when they were on a campus.

As external students, all relied heavily on the visits of the course teacher to guide module completion and provide basic support- via evening or Saturday workshops or individual meetings. All indicated that this teacher input was ‘absolutely essential’ or critical to successful completion of assessment tasks- not so much in terms of content knowledge, but in terms of presentation and understanding specific requirements and acceptable responses. All relied heavily on the ‘mentoring’ and support provided by the visiting teacher; some students indicated the additional value of occasional or regular phone calls with the teacher, depending on need.

*Work and home influences* Students said they were unlikely to do any course related work outside the workshops- except in the week before the teacher’s visit, and then, only for ‘about half an hour’ to ‘an hour’. Students stressed that their busy lives – with competing demands of work, family, visiting family members from overseas, family illnesses and negotiating and navigating a new cultural context meant that they had ‘no time’ outside the workshops to spend on course work and assessment tasks.

Overwhelmingly, students valued the on-site workshops above all else and the support and encouragement they received from the visiting teacher. Each student was adamant that without the face-to-face workshops course progress would be difficult, if not impossible. They needed the ‘routine’ and guidance to provide a structure and context for their study. Most felt that the time between the scheduled workshops was too long and impeded course progress and completion. They indicated a preference for more regular, but perhaps shorter workshops. Further probing indicated that students *did not* believe that strategies such as video conferencing (via Skype, Blackboard or FaceTime etc) were suitable substitutes for personal, face-to-face meetings. Most indicated that face-to-face meetings enabled confidence-building communication opportunities, an opportunity to ‘feel like a student’, as well as mentoring around academic content and procedures for completing assessments.

Given the transition process to the new learning and cultural environment students felt group workshops were of much greater benefit than home-based, on-line learning where they would have to navigate around daily and weekend activities of children and other family members- and the limitations of the internet. All students felt that more regular, but shorter workshops would afford the best support for timely course completion. They said they often felt ‘lost’ and would benefit from more guidance than could be afforded on-line or with occasional visits and conversations. These students were not confident that they would be able to complete their course without face-to-face teacher support. If they had to pay fees for study they would have definitely withdrawn, but the opportunity to study without fees (that continued in 2015) motivated them to continue.

Most importantly perhaps, all students indicated that attending face-to-face sessions afforded a public ‘legitimacy’ to their study that was more culturally aligned with their previous study expectations and experiences and those of their family. At the same time, as mentioned earlier, students were very appreciative of the opportunity to undertake a formal qualification even living in such remote locations.

Students’ responses indicated that the factors most impeding course progression were ‘lack of time’ and lack of regular focused academic support. In short, there was simply ‘no time’. Most had young children, partners sometimes working away, and were dealing with the challenges of living in a new community with new cultural conventions as well as practical requirements around household and family management, plus working, mostly full-time. Some had family members coming to stay for extended times and had to look after them as well as houses, husbands and children.

Overwhelmingly, students indicated that working and caring for homes and children meant there was ‘no time’ for study commitments outside the scheduled workshops. The challenges of ‘starting out’ in a new community, with new work, cultural and language requirements cannot be underestimated. The once-per-term designated workshops/meetings were ‘precious’ and provided a ‘legitimate opportunity’ to allocate time to focus on their work. The scheduled sessions signalled to partners, family and community the legitimacy of their student status, that the course was ‘serious’ and that it had ‘academic requirements’; it wasn’t ‘just babysitting’.

For students or potential students (who also participated in some conversations as part of this work) and were seeking work, their inability to afford paid child care while they undertook an early childhood placement was a major obstacle to course enrolments and/or completion. As they were new to the community and without family support, the high cost of child care prevented them from completing a work placement and hence the course. Typically, those working in child care and with young children were able to take them to work- with a reduced access fee.

**Concluding comments**

Students from language backgrounds other than English are a diverse group and situational factors mean that each student has unique experiences and needs, especially given the range of contexts in which they now live and work. Given this diversity though, their participation experiences in CQU VET early childhood education and care courses and key enabling factors and challenges were remarkably consistent. Further, most concerns were not dissimilar to those encountered by mature students in VET and Higher Education early childhood education courses in previous studies (Elliott, 1996; Elliott, 2002; Watson, 2006)

While this study is focusing mainly on students from language backgrounds other than English, it also highlights some issues around transitioning from Higher Education to VET study modes. There are many studies focusing on student transitions from vocational to Higher Education contexts, especially in teacher education (eg. Hadley & Andrews, 2015) but experiences of students with Higher Education qualifications who are studying in the VET sector are rarely explored. Conversations with degree qualified students indicated that they found the VET expectations and experiences ‘different’, mainly in regard to teaching styles, assessment processes, course structure and course content. But these were considered quite manageable, once they ‘learned the code’.

Students’ main challenges in completing their VET course, however, were not around academic matters *per se*, even English language, but around personal factors and priorities relating to competing demands of home, family, work and study and the complexities of a new cultural context. To some extent, as well, understanding ‘the logistics’ and structural requirements of the provider and external study presented challenges. Analyses of data to date, indicate that a complex matrix of factors, predominantly, the combination of work, family and new cultural commitments together with academic conventions and administrative matters were all consuming. The regular face-to-face workshops provided students with a legitimate ‘space’ to focus on course tasks, made them ‘feel like a student’, afforded some sense of connectedness with tertiary education and enabled navigation of the system..

Students who were planning to transition to a teaching or other Australian qualification felt that the VET experience and particularly the opportunity to use English in an academic context would ease any future transition to Higher Education. However, if students’ main goal was to study at a Higher Education level, then a formal ‘enabling’ course might well have been more suitable preparation. However, in the case of the students interviewed so far in this study, vocational goals, rather than further study were their main focus.

In summary, conversations with students revealed that their study journeys were diverse and their life priorities complex and somewhat unpredictable, findings consistent with previous research on post school study trajectories and study success (eg Bye, Pushkar & Conway, 2007; Deng, Lu & Cao, 2007). It was clear that students had some unmet expectations about their VET study experience, including uncertainty and confusion about the structural components of their course and University administrative processes (eg. how to access university facilities, enrolment, grading etc). For students with an existing degree level qualification there was some surprise at the pedagogical differences between vocational study and their previous study experiences at university in their home country. While, these students did not find the academic content difficult *per se* when they had teacher support to understand the specific assessment and administrative requirements, key impediments to course completion involved a ‘balancing act’ of managing family and home commitments and study and work. Above all, students felt their new cultural environment required greater focus and effort to manage day-to-day life than had been the case in their home countries (or previous communities in Australia) and family commitments consumed almost all their time outside work. There was simply had ‘no time’ to complete course assessments. Work and family life pressures meant that workshop sessions and ‘lead-up’ times were the only opportunities that could be legitimately appropriated for study. Further, these sessions gave public recognition to the value of their study. They cherished this time and the support they received from the visiting teacher, above all else.

Some years ago, writing on the topic of student progression and retention Elliott (1996) indicated that policies guaranteeing access to tertiary education are meaningless if they ‘amount to merely removing formal barriers to enrolment’. The real needs are ‘enabling policies and practices that recognise and actively support the reality of students' contexts and experiences’. Over a 20 year period, mature women students who are studying early childhood education have consistently indicated that the main ‘obstacles’ to successful course completion are the realities of juggling work and family life, especially in contexts of economic vulnerability and complex home and community commitments (Elliott, 1996, 2002). Academic issues, and particularly academic literacy, certainly impacts on course progression, and supporting students to build academic literacy is important for all providers, but in the case of this group of students, factors relating to managing home, family and study expectations and requirements underpinned all other considerations around academic work. Too often it seems, we dismiss students’ views and perceptions of their needs and seek institutionally convenient solutions such as better and faster IT access, and more ‘interactive’ on-line learning platforms and environments.

The reality of ‘what works’ for this small group of students is much more simple- regular, ‘traditional’, personalised, face-to-face workshops complemented by accessible, easy to navigate resources and study guides. In rural and remote regions the cost of providing regular place-based workshops is high, but as we found in conceiving and planning teacher place-based teacher education programs in remote communities (Elliott & Keenan, 2009, 2011) providing regular place-based educational support, while expensive initially, has cost benefits in terms of student completions and outcomes, not to mention students’ sense of engagement with learning.

A final and worrying concern for the early childhood sector more broadly, given on-going supply and demand problems around accessing and retaining qualified staff was that most students interviewed did not expect to work in early childhood education beyond 5 to 10 years; all, except one, expected to move from their present community in the longer term, and especially once their own children reached high school age. Only one student envisaged an on-going career in early childhood education at a level commensurate with a VET qualification. The recent sharp downturn in the resource industry may well have changed families’ plans to remain in a regional community.

In summary, research has indicated a range of demographic and contextual factors implicated in student progression in post school study and the preliminary findings from this small group of students suggest that some similar factors- sense of purpose, motivation, home and work factors, ‘personal reasons’ and pedagogical issues- impacted on study journeys. Consistent with previous research findings, as highlighted by Wilcoxson et al., (2011) and Callan (2005) was students’ need for targeted support and resources for learning. Perhaps most important, is that these students’ experiences, while consistent with those of other students in many ways, are also unique to their context, location and institution. As Wilcoxson et al., (2011) indicate, institutions have ‘individual attrition profiles’ and I suggest, profiles, within profiles, within profiles. As institutions such as CQU are extremely diverse geographically, culturally and academically so too will be the profiles and experiences of students. As such we must recognise and adapt to this diversity in our interventions and pedagogies and advocate for customised support if we are to support student engagement and completions**.**

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