Student Services in the modern university: Responding to changing student needs.

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Abstract

This paper discusses findings from a recent survey of all students at the University of Tasmania, designed to assess the changing needs for student support services. This has revealed that first year students as a group are at greater risk of ‘dropping out’ than are students identified solely as members of equity ‘target groups’, with the exception of students with disabilities. The transitional problems of being first year students, whether direct from school or mature age, appear to be widespread and are associated with inadequate preparation before entry, lack of clear expectations about studies and university life in general, and anxiety about study progress. Being first year is likely to exacerbate problems associated with disadvantaged background. Attrition has enormous costs for both the individual and the institution. The paper argues therefore that providing support for students’ studies, especially in the first year, should not be seen as the job of Student Services professionals alone, nor confined to equity issues, but that academic staff, student administration and student groups themselves should all be involved in what is central to the core teaching and learning enterprise. The holistic approach to student support which integrates existing resources and deals with the student as a whole person demands that Student Services personnel and Academic staff work together to find joint solutions to common student problems.

Introduction: background to the survey, aims and objectives

The study discussed in this paper is part of an overall review of student support services and strategies in the improvement of student participation, retention and success at the University of Tasmania and is linked to the University’s many equity initiatives and the University Equity Plan, 1998 - 2000. The survey examined the changing characteristics, lifestyle and study needs of the student population as these relate to the changing role of University Student Services in the modern university.

The University of Tasmania aims “to achieve a University student profile which more closely reflects that of the broader Tasmanian community” and to “improve participation, retention and success rates for all students, especially those from the targeted equity groups” (University of Tasmania, 1997a, p. 2), but recognises that improving student access is not enough and that the university must “ensure that they stay to complete successfully their courses of study” (Abbott-Chapman, Hughes and Wyld, 1991, p.1; Abbott-Chapman, 1993; Cobbin and Barlow, 1993a; 1993b). This means trying to achieve some sort of “fit” between the expectations and performance of individual students and the expectations and responsiveness of the institution (Abbott-Chapman, Hughes and Wyld, 1992, p. 33). The importance of establishing clear expectations for the student especially within the first few weeks of the first year of study has proved to be a key focus in the survey findings, along with the role of the University Student Services in helping to create and maintain a supportive teaching/learning environment. This involves collaboration with academic teaching staff and university administration.

The role of Student Services in supporting students’ studies and helping students to overcome personal, financial, child care and other problems which affect their studies have been widely recognised (Promnitz and Germain, 1996). This is particularly true since the profile of the student body has become more socially diverse in recent years in the move from an “elite” to a “mass” system of higher education. Indeed “as the recruitment of students becomes a more competitive exercise, the quality and availability of various support services within a university form an important element in defining an institution’s quality and competitiveness” (Promnitz and Germain, 1996, p. 1). A recent study of student retention at Murdoch University for instance, found a complex interrelation of personal, financial and educational reasons for students withdrawing (Salmon, Larsen and Box, 1998, p. 5). In addition, almost a quarter of student withdrawing during the first semester of 1997 were members of target equity groups (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1990; Australian Education Council, 1991; Martin, 1994) and almost 70% of them were from low socio-economic backgrounds.

We should not, however, underestimate the motivation of disadvantaged students to overcome the obstacles to access and participation they may meet, and the importance of self-help groups and a strong sense of ‘perceived personal control’ in education (Abbott-Chapman 1994, Abbott-Chapman, Easthope and O’Connor, 1995). The experience of strong “course commitment” (West, Hore, Bennie, Browne and Kermond, 1987; Abbott-Chapman, Hughes and Wyld, 1992) is often crucial in encouraging persistence in
study and course completion. Student Service providers and academic staff are all involved in providing an institutional climate in which persistence and course completion are encouraged, especially among disadvantaged students, but are not always aware of each other’s contribution to this aim.

This paper argues that a growing diversity among the university student population means that a substantial proportion of our students may now be categorised as members of equity target groups, that they should not be regarded as “marginal”; and that current best practice in terms of delivery of student support, especially learning skills development emphasises the importance of collaboration between academic staff and Student Services, along with support for independent learning in curriculum context (Cross 1998; Harpe & Radloff, 1998; Learmonth, 1998; McInnis, 1998). The first year experience is one of particular challenges for most students in terms of their lack of clear expectations about university study and their often inadequate study/learning skills (McInnis, James and McNaught, 1995). This is generally true, whether or not students are members of equity target groups. In consequence student support should be regarded as ‘everyone’s business’ and central to the core teaching/learning enterprise. The model of Student Services delivery suggested is not located in a discourse of welfare but in a discourse of rights (Abbott-Chapman and Easthope, 1998)

The research survey and student response

The research was conducted in the latter part of 1997 and the first semester 1998 by means of a questionnaire survey sent to all students, both undergraduate and postgraduate, 27 interviews with Student Services administrators and professionals, student leaders and academic staff, and 5 student focus groups, and so includes quantitative and qualitative data analysis. A 34% response rate to the student survey was achieved and 3,650 questionnaires were returned completed.

The respondents were compared with known distributions of the overall student population. The sample population was found to be reasonably representative of the student population as a whole (in some cases exactly representative), except for a significant under representation of males, and of part time students. The gender imbalance seems not to have affected a range of other distributions such as region of home residence, campus of study, faculty of study and overseas residence. In light of this a random check of 100 questionnaires in batches of 20 throughout the sample was undertaken to check data entry of gender specifically. This verification of data found no errors in data entry showing the gender bias to be a genuine response bias which has not affected other distributions. Where relevant all responses have been analysed by gender and by full or part time study so this presents no particular problems.

The national, state and institutional contexts

Commonwealth government equity policies emphasise successful course completion as well as ‘access’ (Long, Carpenter and Hayden, 1995) in ensuring that the ‘open door’ university does not become the ‘revolving door’ university (Cope and Hannah, 1975). Problems of student attrition as well as recruitment demand new institutional arrangements, especially with regard to the monitoring of student progress (Elsworth, Day, Hurworth and Andrews 1982; Carpenter and Western, 1984; Hamilton, 1986; Power, Robertson and Baker 1987; Kilminster and Muller, 1989; Abbott-Chapman, Hughes and Wyld 1991, 1992). The allocation of funding to universities under the Higher Education Equity Program (HEEP) as announced in the report Higher Education for the 1998-2000 Triennium (DEETYA, 1997) which provides seeding or incentive funding for equity initiatives is based on an assessment of each University’s Equity Plans, and a comparison of performance in the current and previous year for equity groups against the equity indicators (access, participation, success and retention).This underlines the importance of university support for students belonging to the targeted equity groups with regard to retention and successful performance as well as access and participation.

The West and North West regions of Tasmania especially have traditionally had lower Year 12 completion and Year 12/University transition rates than other regions and this has been a long-time concern of the University of Tasmania, although in terms of disadvantaged socio-demographic and economic indicators the State is performing about as could be expected (Abbott-Chapman, Hughes and Wyld 1991, p.28). The high degree of rurality of the Tasmanian population as a whole, and the depressed economic situation of the State, with high rates of unemployment and youth unemployment (ABS, 1998a, p. 54), low per capita incomes and lowest per capita disposable incomes (ABS, 1998b, p. 121), have long created impediments to Year 12 completion (ABS, 1999, p. 9), higher education access and participation - despite a range of measures taken by the University, its feeder schools and secondary colleges and by the Department of Education, Training, Community and Cultural Development.
The State’s rurality and difficult socio-economic situation is reflected in the emphasis which the University of Tasmania places in its Equity Plan 1998-2000 on the improved recruitment and retention of students from rural and isolated areas and from low SES backgrounds. Efforts to increase the access and participation of students from the West and North West especially have been strengthened with some classes offered in Burnie following amalgamation in 1991 of the then University of Tasmania and the Tasmanian State Institute of Technology as the Hobart and Launceston campuses of the University. The opening of the North West Centre in Burnie in 1995 as the third campus of the University, offering a limited range of subjects to students finding it hard to access the Launceston or Hobart campuses has contributed to these efforts. The NW Centre was awarded a prestigious National Teaching Award in 1997 in the category “Institutional Open Award - Services for Australian Students” in recognition of its success “in developing and enhancing higher education opportunities for people who are living in this region of the State” (University of Tasmania, 1997c, p. 1).

A number of initiatives have been taken which reflect this emphasis. These range from the offering of bursaries and scholarships to rurally and socio-economically disadvantaged students, a schools links program which uses students and recent graduates as ‘ambassadors’ to school and secondary college students, improved course information services for potential and enrolling students through the strengthened Student Information Service, bridging courses especially for mature age students through the UPP (University Preparation Program), mature age students’ orientation workshops offered through the Student Counselling Service, and learning skills development through the Learning Skills Unit, which was brought under Student Support Services at the beginning of 1998. The support services offered are generic, and not exclusively for the use of rurally and socio-economically disadvantaged students, but they are geared to service the special needs of those students if required.

Despite the growing diversity of its student population the University has managed to reduce attrition rates substantially through a variety of measures. Definitions of apparent or ‘raw’ retention rates are normally based on a comparison of the “flow through” of student numbers, undergraduate and postgraduate, from one year to the next. This statistical process cannot of course ‘track’ individual students through their degree course, and also includes numbers of students who may have joined the University mid-year. The actual attrition process is more complex than these standardised measures suggest (Abbott-Chapman, Hughes and Wyld, 1992, Chap. 4). The raw attrition rate for 1998 has been calculated by Student Administration as 9% - suggesting a low and declining attrition rate. The attrition rate for first year commencing students is currently 13.4%, which is comparatively low in national terms (University of Tasmania, Student Administration, 1998a). The ‘critical period’ each year is the two weeks leading up to the census date on March 31st, at which point students incur a HECS liability. The first five or six weeks of the first Semester therefore are crucial in monitoring student progress and working to prevent attrition.

The low attrition rate at the University of Tasmania bears witness to the very active stance taken by the University in the development of services to support students’ studies and to help create a more accessible and friendly teaching/learning environment for all (University of Tasmania, 1997b, pp. 1, 2). An integrated model of Student Services delivery is currently being developed through university wide student support initiatives and activities as part of a team approach not only between the various Student Services sections but also between Student Services professionals and the Academic Schools, for instance in the development of Student Mentoring programs and “First Year Coordinator” support groups.

**Changing students: changing lifestyles**

Our study has shown that changing student characteristics and changing conditions of students’ lives make more difficult institutional ‘socialisation’ into the student’s role, the creation of student identity and the development of a rich and vibrant campus life. The pursuit of university study is becoming more and more solitary, and less a group activity of a ‘community of learners’ (McInnis, 1998). More students are becoming ‘disengaged’ as pressures of employment, financial problems, family and community commitments take their toll, especially for the mature aged, and so being a student becomes more and more ‘a job of work’. This has been noted in a number of studies, especially the report of the national study of the first year experience (McInnis, et al, 1995).

The growing diversity of the student population in terms of social, economic and ethnic background places greater demands upon the university and its feeder schools and colleges in terms of student preparation, orientation and induction. National studies have shown that academic staff generally believe that more open access has led to a ‘lowering of standards’ with less prepared students who require more ‘hand feeding’ and have trouble establishing priorities (McInnis et al. 1995, p. 89). Students do not see things this way and are
generally more positive about their performance than are their lecturers. Our study has found that students across the board, whether of high or low tertiary entry scores, or whether of alternative entry, are anxious not merely to ‘scrape through’ or to ‘cope’ but to do well. They believe that as they are paying for their education through HECS they have a right to be more demanding as consumers than in the past, when higher education was regarded as a privilege for the few. This has implications for the kind of institutional socialisation which is seen as possible or desirable in moving from an ‘elite’ to a ‘mass’ higher education system, and makes academics much more accountable to their students for effective teaching and learning. Academics themselves are highly pressured by the diversity and intensity of teaching, research, publication and administration demands placed upon them and most complain they simply do not have time to respond to students’ learning needs and problems as they once did. The national study of first year students showed that fifty per cent of students did not believe they received helpful feedback from staff, and only about a third thought Year 12 was a good preparation for university (McInnis, 1998, p. 8). However, a substantial proportion of students do not enter University as Year 12 leavers.

Instead of using an age category to define “mature age” students (e.g. over 25 years) we asked about type of entry and related this to students’ age. From this analysis we found that almost all (99.4%) students who said they entered University as “mature age” (rather than “direct entry” or “1, 2 years after school”) were over 22 years, 35% of them over 27 years. In terms of all “entry modes” which were not “direct from school” of they entered University as “mature age” (rather than “direct entry” or “1, 2 years after school”) were over 22 entry and related this to students’ age. From this analysis we found that almost all (99.4%) students who said instead of using an age category to define “mature age” students (e.g. over 25 years) we asked about type of entry and related this to students’ age. From this analysis we found that almost all (99.4%) students who said they entered University as “mature age” (rather than “direct entry” or “1, 2 years after school”) were over 22 years, 35% of them over 27 years. In terms of all “entry modes” which were not “direct from school” of they entered University as “mature age” (rather than “direct entry” or “1, 2 years after school”) were over 22 entry and related this to students’ age. From this analysis we found that almost all (99.4%) students who said they entered University as “mature age” (rather than “direct entry” or “1, 2 years after school”) were over 22 years, 35% of them over 27 years. In terms of all “entry modes” which were not “direct from school” of

As many as 79% of all students had had a paid job or jobs in the previous two years - 50% of all students being in paid work in the week prior to the study (44% of first year students had a job compared with 47% in the McInnis, et al (1995) national study). Evidence both quantitative and qualitative showed that growing numbers of students are experiencing financial problems (Bower & Maynard, 1997) and the majority of students in paid work (76%) said their job is ‘essential’ or ‘important’ for the continuation of their studies. As many as 29% of students said that paid work is their sole or main form of support, compared with 28% whose sole or main form of support is AUSTUDY/ABSTUDY and 31% who are solely or mainly supported by their family, 6% scholarships and 7% other means including personal savings. Students worked on average 18.6 hours per week, with great variations. A quarter of first year undergraduate students worked more than 11 hours per week, compared with 22% in the McInnis, et al (1995) study which may reflect the economic disadvantage of Tasmanian students and their need to work. About half of all students in work (approximately 25% of the student body) were in casual and rostered jobs, which means that often the students are ‘on call’ to employers which inevitably means a clash with class times! Although students in the survey claimed having a job does not affect their study progress it affects significantly time spent on campus. In focus groups students spoke of the stress created by competing demands of study and work, and of having at times to go to work and risk being reprimanded about absence from lectures, because “if you don’t go when the employer wants you, you will lose the job.” Others spoke of falling asleep in class, over-tired because of their work late at night. Typical work is in the hospitality industry, fast food and retail.

Full time students (both undergraduate and postgraduate) overall spend an average of 22 hours on campus every week, part time students about half that. Hours vary by day of the week with least hours on campus on Friday and 34% of students spending one hour or less on campus on Friday. Naturally, the more hours students spend in paid work the fewer hours they spend on campus. Half of the students travel daily to one of the three campuses in their own car, or that of a friend or relative, despite the fact that 54% live 15 minutes travel time or less from campus. Cars, we learned, are essential for many students not just to travel between where they live and the University but between University and the job.

Two thirds of students say they prefer to study off campus when not in class and the same proportion say they are “only occasionally” or “never” on campus when not in class. Studying appears to be an increasingly solitary occupation fitted in round the other demands of everyday life. These findings on changing student lifestyles have important implications not only for a multi-faceted approach to delivery of student support, but also for on-campus services available for students (especially mature aged) who are rarely there. Providing support for students’ studies is a complex and challenging business, which may require a stocktake for many institutions (McInnis, et al, 1995, p. 116).
Student knowledge and use of student services

All the support services provided by the University are involved in one way or another in supporting students’ studies - not only Counselling, Careers and the Learning Skills Unit, but also the Student Information Service, Child Care Centre, Student Employment Service and University accommodation. Targeted programs directed at students with disabilities (Disability Advisory staff working from within the Equity Unit), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Riawunna located in the Arts/Humanities Faculty) and the International Students’ Office (for Overseas fee paying students) are all involved. There is a growing awareness among all the service providers that a concerted effort to further collaboration is required in order to address the variety of needs in the student community, and so work towards the enhancement of student participation and the reduction of attrition. In addition, support services need to be integrated into the mainstream student experience (McInnis, 1998, p. 9).

The need for integration and coordination of Student Services is a theme in a number of recent studies (Koder, 1991; Promnitz and Germain, 1996; Salmon, Larsen and Box, 1998). The national study of first year students also highlighted the importance of “mainstreaming” student services within the overall academic enterprise, preventing duplication of effort and gaining maximum impact (McInnis et al. 1995, p.116)

In most universities at present Student Services are somewhat outside the “mainstream” of academic activity and this means that students and academic staff do not always know what is available, and so are unable to access services or refer students to them. It does not seem to matter how many avenues of communication are tried - and Student Services at the University of Tasmania have tried everything from posters and pamphlets, adverts in student newspapers and the world wide web - there are always students who claim not to know about services available and “wish they had known sooner”, when need arises. Students say that Orientation week is usually too crowded and frenetic to introduce this information. At the University of Tasmania, a significant proportion of over a third of students say they know nothing about student services provided and wish they knew more.

Even targeted programs for students with special needs, such as students with disabilities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are less well known than anticipated. About 34% of students with disabilities and 24% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students said they “know nothing” about the services designed for them. A previous study of students with disabilities who withdrew showed that few had consulted a Disability Advisory staff member (Bates, 1997). In addition, a substantial proportion of students who are members of target groups prefer not to identify as such, and choose to use “mainstream” support services.

This changing context in which student support programs operate has been noted by a number of writers (Long, Carpenter and Hayden, 1995; McInnis, et al, 1995; Promnitz and Germain, 1996). In the past many students and lecturers have tended to see Student Services as ‘outside’ the core academic enterprise, though supportive of it, and as mainly providing individual counselling and consultations in Counselling, Careers and Learning Skills support. Though this view is changing in some Academic Schools, as our research shows, there is still familiarisation and promotional work to be done in establishing a broader, more collaborative framework for action. At the University of Tasmania collaboration involves Student Services in support which goes beyond individual consultations, which are very resource and labour intensive, to include broad ranging student supports delivered through workshops, mentoring programs, seminars and specialist Consultative Services to Academic Schools.

The most used services by individual students are Counselling and Careers (16% of all students respectively) and the Learning Skills Unit (11% of all students). Students who use the services are largely positive about the service they receive and few students are dissatisfied with the services. The highest effectiveness ratings by students are for the Learning Skills Unit and Counselling, which over two thirds of students rate as ‘very good’ or ‘good’ and only 6% rate as ‘poor’. The Learning Skills Unit, which is very new was part of the Centre for University Learning and Teaching (now disbanded) at the time of the survey and is now part of the Student Services section. The fact that so many students had used it when it is very new and relatively unknown suggests that students’ usage, especially in first year, is likely to expand rapidly. First year usage of the Counselling Service was 10.7% and Learning Skills Support was 14.6%. This compares with figures from the national study of 13.3% and 19.5% (McInnis, et al, 1995, p. 52).

Student Services appear to provide a “safety net” for those students at risk of “dropping out”, even though only a minority of students use them at present. Promnitz and Germain (1996, p. 17) assert that low usage of student services cannot be linked to withdrawal of students and that “there is nothing to suggest that those...
who withdrew from study failed to use the support services while at university”. Of students sampled who
had persisted in their studies “eleven per cent of these students directly attributed their continuing enrolment
as being due to assistance from support service staff” (Promnitz and Germain, 1996, p. 14). Focus group data
showed that students who had not used any of the Student Services were “glad they are there”, and felt this
gave them a sense of confidence and security of somewhere to go if the need arose.

**Equity groups and targeted services**

Some members of targeted equity groups choose not to self identify as such on the University enrolment
form, and choose not to use specific services designed for target groups. On our questionnaire we asked
students if they have a disability, and whether they had indicated this on the enrolment form, and if they are
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and whether they had indicated this. From these responses it became
clear that students with disabilities are less likely to want to declare their disability on the student enrolment
form, than are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to declare their indigenous status on the
enrolment form. The ‘declared’ rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students was 1.2%, while the
‘true’ rate was 1.5%. The ‘declared’ rate of students with disabilities was 1.9%, whereas the ‘true’ rate was
5.4%. Of course, because the disabilities are self assessed we have no means of knowing the range of
disabilities involved.

Rating of Student Services for ‘targeted’ groups was very favourable, with only 2% of students with
disabilities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students rating them as ‘poor’, although as we noted
above a significant minority of students in these target group categories either do not know about or choose
not to use the special services provided. How to support the students who do not self identify then becomes
an issue, and availability of “mainstream” support services especially for first year students is important in
“bridging the gap, for instance through university preparation programs and learning skills development”.
The Equity Unit and Riawunna also have the important role of raising awareness among academic and
administrative staff as a whole about the special needs of these students - as well as providing targeted
support services.

In providing assistance for disadvantaged students, whatever form that disadvantage takes, the main concern
for service providers is to encourage lecturers and tutors to see them as a student first and foremost, and not
to see the ‘disadvantage’ first. This means that students of equity target groups may be referred to, and
assisted by, other services outside those ‘targeted’, such as Counselling, Careers or the Learning Skills Unit.
In this sense, ‘mainstreaming’ can be a very positive part of improving student participation and success. A
recent Student Services publication emphasises this point with regard to students with learning disabilities
and aims to help academic staff to understand learning disability (LD) and students who have it and so
“create a learning environment that is inclusive of students with LD whilst maintaining academic standards”
(University of Tasmania, 1998b, p. 1).

**Who are the “standard” students?**

The “targeting” of DEETYA designated “equity groups” in terms of improving access and participation has
both positive and negative outcomes for the way students who are members of such groups are treated in any
university. The most positive effects are associated with affirmative action in terms of university recruitment
policies, outreach and bridging programs and special support services provided by the University in order to
help overcome disadvantages, lack of study skills and to encourage persistence to course completion
(Abbott-Chapman, 1993). These activities and policies help to raise awareness of access and equity issues
among the general student and academic staff populations and provide a more friendly, responsive and
welcoming environment for students experiencing disadvantage in a variety of ways. The financial
implications for universities of the introduction of best practice with regard to access and equity of
disadvantaged groups in higher education have also been investigated (NBEET, 1994).

The negative aspects associated with the ‘labelling’ and targeting of these groups are the tendency to
stigmatise whether consciously or unconsciously the students so labelled, and to identify them within a
discourse of ‘welfare’ rather than a discourse of rights - as passive recipients of institutional handouts
(Abbott-Chapman and Easthope, 1998). The fact that some students with disabilities or who are Aboriginal
and Torres Strait Islander prefer not to self identify on enrolment forms or to use the targeted services
designed for them illustrates this point.

But is the perception of the target equity groups as ‘marginal’ or ‘non-standard’ students an accurate one?
Who are the ‘standard’ students who do not fall into any of the target equity group categories? We set about
trying to answer this question using the survey data to hand by constructing a scale or index of disadvantage
and examining the student distributions so revealed. The aim was to find out how many students are members of one or more equity groups. (For clearly the six groups are not mutually exclusive.) In addition, it is important to point out that membership of the equity target groups designates disadvantage and access problems but does not in itself indicate substantial material and financial hardship - this is true of only some of the groups.

In constructing the index of disadvantage, based on the 6 Equity Groups (DEET 1990) we identified Non English Speaking Background students, students with disabilities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students as those who said that they are, whether or not they declared this fact on their enrolment forms. Since we had no information on parental income or other background socio-economic indicators we categorised as ‘low socio-economic status’ all students who said that their main source of income is AUSTUDY or ABSTUDY. Rural and isolated students were identified as those who said that their permanent address in Tasmania is in a ‘small town’ or ‘rural area/farm’ as these had been found to correlate well with regional differences. Females in non traditional areas were all those studying Science, Applied or Agricultural Science and Engineering (We, of course, excluded all permanent overseas residents from this analysis). Membership of each individual target group among respondents is shown in Table 1 and combined memberships in Table 2, below.

Table 1: Target Equity Group Memberships (Separate)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Membership</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Females in Non trad. areas</td>
<td>346</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural and Isolated</td>
<td>764</td>
<td>22.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low SES</td>
<td>1018</td>
<td>29.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NESB</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ab/TSI</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students with disabilities</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No memberships</td>
<td>1513</td>
<td>44.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Target Equity Group Memberships (Combined)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Membership</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>1513</td>
<td>44.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Equity Group</td>
<td>1321</td>
<td>38.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Equity Groups</td>
<td>506</td>
<td>14.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Equity Groups</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Equity Groups</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Students</td>
<td>3414</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These findings show that contrary to popular expectation the majority (56%) of students at the University of Tasmania who are Australian permanent residents are “non standard” students as members of one or more target equity groups! Since this figure looked very high, even for a student population in a ‘disadvantaged’ State, we decided to see what the figures would look like if we excluded women in non traditional study areas. This still left us with 51% of ‘non standard’ students and revealed that half of the women in non traditional study areas are also members of one or more other disadvantaged groups. Earlier research has shown that the increased retention of girls, especially to higher education has been marked by “strong class inequalities” (Yates, 1993, pp. 32, 33) and the influence of the independent schools (Williams, Long, Carpenter and Hayden, 1993, p. 83; Abbott-Chapman, Hughes and Wyld, 1991, p. 118). These figures suggest that in Tasmania at least there may have been a shift towards retention of girls from disadvantaged (including rural) regions and schools.

This analysis of ‘standard’ and ‘non standard’ students puts quite a different interpretation on what we mean by ‘mainstream’ and on the way we support students’ studies. McInnis et al (1995) also argue that universities and their academic staff are still grappling to come to terms with the full implications of diversity in higher education. “The expansion of participation has increased the critical mass for identifiable subgroups that were formerly significantly under-represented in universities. In this context the notion of a mainstream of students is somewhat illusory” (McInnis et al, 1995, p. ix).

Since members of target equity groups are generally regarded as being more “at risk” of dropping out of University we then compared responses of target group members with other students on a range of indices of “student satisfaction”. Firstly, while 80% of students overall are enjoying University life and their studies (a
very positive response) there were no statistically significant differences between members of the individual target groups and the rest of the student body. This seems to suggest that despite the hurdles which have to be overcome in entering the University, and hence problems of “access”, these disadvantaged students are enjoying their participation once they get there. The findings also suggest that targeted academic and student service supports which are in place are working to reduce the problems which may arise for disadvantaged students and is a positive comment on those supports. Focus group responses confirmed this finding.

In response to questions on progress of study, study expectations and availability of academic staff support there are very few statistically significant differences which distinguish them from all other students in this regard. This may be regarded as surprising by those who anticipated that the effects of ‘disadvantage’ at entry might continue through into ‘participation’ rates. Indeed, as we have observed elsewhere those who have persisted in their studies to overcome every hurdle often become characterised by higher motivation, course commitment and what we have called ‘stickability’, or the will to win (Abbott-Chapman, 1994).

Members of target equity groups in terms of our findings are in the main at no more self assessed risk of dropping out than other students because they are highly motivated to succeed, have strong support networks, including self help groups such as S.E.A.L. (Students for Equal Access in Learning for students with disabilities) and a range of ‘targeted’ supports available to them. In addition, members of Target Equity Groups are encouraged to persist with study by lecturers who are responsive to their special problems and needs (Abbott-Chapman, Easthope and O’Connor, 1995). On the other hand first year students as a group emerged as at greater risk of dropping out than almost any other group with the exception of students with disabilities.

The problems of the first year transition

In comparison with other years and with the target equity groups first year students appear more negative in a number of ways. When we look at how well students think they are progressing in their studies we find marked differences between first and later years - differences which are much more marked than between ‘disadvantaged’ groups and the rest. As many as 17.4% of first year students said they were not progressing very well, or not well at all, compared with 15.4% of second year students and around 10% of students in each subsequent year.

In addition, in response to the question about whether they had found their studies this year as expected, a higher proportion of first year students said ‘no’ or ‘not sure what to expect’ (39.2% compared with 24.4% of all students). As many as a quarter of students said they were ‘not sure what to expect’, which is about twice the proportion for the whole student body (Table 3 below). We would expect students in later years to have a better sense of what to expect, based on their previous experience, and it is surprising therefore that a quarter of all students of whatever year still report lack of clarity of expectations. This lack of clarity is reported less by students as years increase (7% in Year 7!!) (Abbott-Chapman, 1998, p. 173).

The lack of clarity in first year students’ expectations has been noted as a problem by other researchers (McInnes et al 1995) and remains an issue to be addressed by the whole university community. The match or mismatch of students’ and institutions’ expectations, as we discussed at the beginning can make all the difference between student persistence or premature leaving.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Equity Grp</th>
<th>Are Studies as Expected?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disabilities</td>
<td>55  (27.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ab/TSI</td>
<td>12  (23.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sm town/rural</td>
<td>232 (30.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AB/AUSTUDY</td>
<td>318 (31.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Students</td>
<td>1178 (32.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Yr Students</td>
<td>223 (20.0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Is Study at University as Expected?
The main difference between members of equity groups and first year students in general is the higher rate of students with disabilities who think they are ‘not doing so well’ or ‘not at all well’ in their studies (25.5%) compared with 14% of all students.

The study by Bates (1997) of reasons for students with disabilities withdrawing drew attention to the health problems faced by students with severe disabilities and the sometimes ‘inflexible’ approach of some academic departments in dealing with them.

In order to further clarify the special nature of the first year experience in this regard as compared with the experiences of equity target group members, we have repeated our analyses with reference exclusively to undergraduates. This is because there are obviously some key differences between undergraduate and postgraduate commencers. Despite the fact that some commencing postgraduates do experience induction and orientation problems (especially if they gained their first degree at another University) they are in the main clearer about what to expect, much more positive about study progress, less likely to change their course and more determined to complete their studies than are undergraduate commencers. In our further analysis we compared first year undergraduates with all other undergraduates in their responses to key questions on participation and retention; and equity target group members with all other undergraduates, including first years. This refinement of our analysis confirmed clearly the earlier points made and highlights others. In summary, there are highly statistically significant differences in perceptions of study progress, expectations of study, course changing and intention to complete between first year undergraduates and other undergraduates. By contrast there are few statistically significant differences between the equity target group members and other undergraduates. Noticeable exceptions are students with disabilities who are more negative about study progress, course change and completion; also Aboriginal students who are less clear about what to expect of their studies; and Non English Speaking Background students who also are less clear about what to expect and are less positive about their study progress.

There were however, no significant differences by year of study in terms of the degree of support given by lecturers or tutors if students have study problems which tends to explode the myth of first year students being ignored. A reassuring 70% of students said that their lecturers were always or usually available when they have study problems, and only 1% said they were ‘never’ available. Overall students seemed more positive about staff approachability than in the McInnis et al study (McInnis, 1998, p. 3). However, among special equity groups such as students with a disability and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students there is a higher proportion who say ‘some are and some aren’t’ supportive (19% students with a disability and 12% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students compared with 7% of all students). Although actual numbers are very small they perhaps suggest that not all academic staff are yet aware of the special problems which such students might face, and some of the simple and straightforward ways of dealing with these. Staff development programs may be needed.

While the special problems faced by equity target group members are recognised and being catered for the First Year students’ responses indicate orientation and preparation problems which are not yet adequately being met. Uncertainty about what is required with regard to writing assignments, sitting examinations, undertaking library searches, using computers, making tutorial presentations, workload and assessment procedures has been highlighted by students in this survey and confirms findings from other research. What seems self evident to lecturers who have worked all their lives in universities does not seem at all obvious to many first year students! We need to “demystify the university experience” and recognise that “Patterns and processes of support are therefore central to the academic enterprise and not tangential to it” (Baynes and Edwards, 1997, p. 47). The problems of first year transition and institutional socialisation have been known and have been researched for many years (Williams, 1982; Williams and Pepe, 1983), but have possibly gained less attention over the last decade in favour of greater affirmative action and targeted support for target groups. However, it would appear that the “generic” problems of higher education transition still remain, and are not peculiar to any one particular group, and so demand a “generic” as well as specific response on the part of the University.

**Integrating students into a full and lively university experience can no longer be done by well-meaning academics working in isolation from equally well-meaning support services. Nor is it enough to provide more and more support service to plug up the gaps and gulfs in student backgrounds and experiences (McInnis, 1998, p. 10).**

There is growing interest in ‘foundation’ programmes in the development of learning skills and in the setting of clear and explicit expectations for student performance, which draw together what is already being done within Student Services and across the Academic Schools, as a team approach (McInnis, 1997; 1998).
Conclusions

The University of Tasmania survey confirmed that student diversity is increasing and that ‘non standard students’ in terms of membership of DEET target equity groups comprise more than 50% of the University of Tasmania student body, a change that may be reflected in other universities. It confirmed too, that a majority of students have considerable financial concerns and depend upon casual or part time work to enable them to study. During the previous 2 years 80% have had one or more jobs, and about 50% at time of the research survey were in paid employment. Over half the students travel by car not so much to arrive easily on campus as to have a means of leaving swiftly to go to a job. The majority in employment need the money in order to continue as a student, and financial pressures are widespread. Nearly half are mature age entrants, 39% are over 25 years of age, and though 1 in 6 has a dependent child, many do not have satisfactory child care arrangements. The conflicting pressures of family, employment and study often lead to performance anxiety and stress.

Two thirds of students prefer not to study on campus or even to be on campus if they are not actually in lectures. They spend less time on campus than previously believed and less time in small groups or group activities learning from each other. Their experience of study is often that of a solitary occupation or one of interaction with technology rather than a community of learners, a phenomenon that has been observed in a study of other Australian universities (McInnis, et al, 1995). Changes in the notion of universities as vibrant communities of scholars have affected the way in which students perceive and access the support services available to them, and pose new challenges for the delivery of Student Services. Consistent with national averages they use support services and value them but a significant proportion do not know much about the range of services they might access should they need to do so, including targeted services for equity group members such as students with disabilities and Aboriginal students.

Growth of demand for learning skills support in first year is marked, as students face the demands of higher education ‘transition’, and an increasingly technologically sophisticated learning environment. In first year, students who are thinking of dropping out, because they do not have a clear picture of what is expected of them or of the aims and goals of their courses, do not always seek the services and support mechanisms available, nor the assistance of their lecturers, before deciding to leave. Their capacity for ‘course commitment’ or ‘stickability’ is in its formative stages in the first year of study and requires nurturing. Overwhelmingly, students want their lecturers to communicate clearly an enthusiasm for their subject and be able to present clear goals and aims for their courses and give timely and constructive feedback. Whether or not they are members of equity target groups they want to be seen first and foremost as a student, not just someone needing help, and they want not to scrape through or to ‘cope’ but to ‘do well’ and achieve their full potential.

The traditional image of the full-time student direct from school, financially supported by their parents, free to engage in all that campus life can offer with time to do so, and challenged and fascinated by intellectual pursuit for its own sake, is decreasingly valid. In addressing the needs of our increasingly diverse, increasingly vocal student body, and in bringing to bear all the general and specialist services at our disposal, we need to develop further team work and new collaborative student support models that are appropriate for students’ changing needs and circumstances. This is especially true in responding to the particular needs of first year students.

The holistic approach to student academic and social support which integrates existing University resources can put great strain upon Student Services personnel already over-stretched in delivering quality services to increasing numbers of students in a climate of economic restraint. Often the initiative for further collaboration with Academic staff in the provision of learning skills and other support programs may be seen as an added “task”. This reluctance needs to be overcome for the mutual benefit of all. The University of Tasmania is working to find its own solutions to emerging students needs in the context of newly formed partnerships between Academics and Student Services personnel and is taking practical steps to develop Student Mentoring Programs, Learning Skills Workshops and First Year Coordinator Support Programs for instance. In the current economic climate in Australian universities however, Student Services may be regarded by management as ‘expensive’ and thus targeted for cuts which may make the sort of collaboration suggested difficult to establish and develop. Each university’s solution to these common problems will be decided by the human and financial resources available. Collaboration across Faculties, and across Academic and Student Services administration is one way of making the most of these.
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This article is a revised version of a Paper Presented at the 3rd National Equity and Access Conference, Yeppoon, Queensland, 29th September - 2nd October, 1998 and has benefited from the comments of three anonymous reviewers.