Improving Adaptation for 1st Year Business Students from Diverse Learning Environments

Frances WOODSIDE

University of Southern Queensland Australia

*Corresponding author

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Abstract. The first year of tertiary study can bring many challenges for students. For example:- learning to manage time and study practices; changes in personal relationships; changes in mental states; homesickness; understanding academic expectations; managing social and cultural diversity; developing a work/life/home/balance; language difficulties and cultural acclimatization. Courses generally have a diverse range of students from different countries and backgrounds, this can make it difficult to meet the varied needs of students to help overcome these challenges. For many of our international students, adapting from a predominantly instructor focused system to an active learning environment can mean that students face some challenges which in turn hinder student learning. Similarly, there is a large proportion of mature age students who have not been exposed to the tertiary education environment for some years. This study proposes to identify the difficulties experienced by students entering a new learning environment. The study aims to provide educators with a better understanding of student challenges from diverse backgrounds and will propose strategies and practices that may help to reduce these challenges. This study will focus on four groups of students: international students studying off-shore, international students studying on-campus, domestic students and mature age students. In this way, difficulties for all groups can be identified and strategies proposed for each group.

Introduction

The first year of tertiary study can bring many challenges for students such as: learning to manage time and study practices; changes in personal relationships; changes in mental states; homesickness; understanding academic expectations; managing social and cultural diversity; developing a work/ life/home/balance; language difficulties and cultural acclimatization. First year core courses generally have a diverse range of students from different countries and backgrounds. Similarly, there is quite some variation in the make-up of students where some are fresh out of college or high-school, some have been working a couple of years, some continue to work part time or full time; some are mature age students who have not been exposed to the tertiary education environment for some years. This large diversity in student characteristics can make it difficult to meet the varied needs of students to help overcome the challenges they face. This study proposes to identify the difficulties experienced by students entering a new learning environment. The study aims to provide educators with a better understanding of student challenges from diverse backgrounds and will propose strategies and practices that may help to reduce these challenges.

This study will focus on four groups of students: international students studying off-shore, international students studying on-campus, domestic students and mature age students. In this way, difficulties for all groups can be identified and strategies proposed for each group. Some studies have been previously undertaken in education contexts such as accounting, nursing, science, and engineering however this study aims at understanding marketing education as it lends itself to a more active learning environment than other disciplines. Furthermore, studies that have examined different education environments (i.e. passive/ active) have predominantly used experiments and manipulated the passive/ active environment by using a one off experiment conducted over one semester. Whereas

this research will categorize the students into the environments they have been exposed to over many years. For the purposes of this research, a quantitative methodology is appropriate given that groups will be compared to determine if there is relationship between the different types of student and the challenges they encounter. The objectives of this research are: (1) to determine the challenges encountered by students when they study a 1st year university course; (2) to determine if different types of students experience the same or different challenges; (3) to determine how the students study and their learning behaviours and practices (which will inform objective 4); (4) develop practical solutions to reduce the impact of the challenges.

For many of our international students, adapting from a predominantly instructor focused system to an active learning environment can mean that students face some challenges which in turn hinder student learning. Therefore the research question for this study is: What are the challenges that impact students undertaking a `1st year marketing course from diverse backgrounds and how can these challenges be reduced?

This study differs from previous studies by (1) examining students previous learning environments (i.e. the teaching style received in the students previous education environment - passive v active); (2) active/ passive learning environment is not controlled through research design but rather a historical measure is taken; (3) this study does not focus on learning outcomes but instead focuses on the challenges experienced by students, with a view to reducing these by better understanding students preferred study habits; (4) in this way the intention is to provide tools or guidelines to aid the transition to university study from diverse previous learning environments.

Literature Review

Identification of the needs and challenges of differing cohorts of students has become important with the increased growth in international student numbers in universities in Western countries. International students now make up approximately 50% of commencing students in business and roughly 83% of those are from Asian countries, the majority from China and India [1]. Differences in the social backgrounds of students can compound transition and learning issues and make course design and delivery difficult to suit the learning needs of a diverse student cohort [2].

Over the last few decades, education research literature in higher education has been influenced by constructivist learning theory, proposing that learning is more efficient if learners actively make sense of what they are learning, in order to build coherent and organized knowledge. Constructivist teaching methods are typically student-centered and consider students as active participants in the process of learning [3].

For many years educators in other countries have operated under a paradigm where they seek to impart knowledge to students in the form of information transfer [4]. Students in such environments receive information from the teacher/ professor and internalize it through memorization, this is known as passive learning [5]. Despite its widespread adoption, the traditional lecture format has been criticized as following a one-size-fits-all approach, and thus fails to accommodate the different skills and learning preferences of the students [6]. Current research suggests that students who actively engage in the teaching material develop deeper levels of thinking and are able to better encode, store, and retrieve knowledge than traditional lectures [7]. With this in mind educators have been exploring different teaching techniques such as active learning or experiential learning.

Active learning includes various practices designed to make the learner responsible for their own learning, a process where students engage in doing activities and thinking about what they are doing. These practices may include: group discussions, interactive lectures, quizzes, content relevant games, role plays; written exercises; problems sets; class discussions; audience response systems; and debates [8,9]. The proposed benefits of active learning for students include: increased involvement compared to passive learning; active engagement in activities; enhanced motivation for learning; greater retention of knowledge; and engagement in higher order thinking such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation [10].

In particular, with the advent of computers and the internet, online education has been proposed as significant contender to traditional lecture instruction. Because of its asynchronous nature, online education is believed to offer a stronger personalized experience by giving more availability to learning resources such that students have more freedom in deciding when, what, and how to learn [11]. In an online environment, students can access videos and other course materials at their own pace, pausing, rewinding, replaying, and going back and forth from video clips to problems. Moreover, online education offers wider accessibility and thus can be readily scaled up to reach a much boarder audience at comparatively affordable cost.

Yet regardless of the purported benefits of online education, a number of meta-analyses have indicated that the effect of online education is not superior to traditional lectures where some studies found positive effect, others have found negative impacts [12]. Unfortunately, several studies have found that online study programs may increase educational divides particularly for minority students, students of low socio-economic status, where students with weaker study skills tended to benefit less from online education [13]. Students in an online learning environment may also experience feelings of isolation, frustration and confusion or reduced interest in the subject matter [14].

Despite the move to a more student-focused learning environment, sixty-six percent of 1st year students in Australia report that coursework emphasizes memorization [15], with lecturing being the predominant method of teaching. Lecturing captures 25% of all teaching activities particularly in the fields of Engineering and Business where lectures are more common than all other activities. Activities where students have opportunity to interact with staff and students in small group activities are much less common in most fields of education with the exception of education and health [16].

Self-determination theory (SDT) proposes that both student-centered learning environments and teacher-centered learning environments incorporate need-supportive ingredients. For example in teach-centered learning environments, lectures provide guidance and structure to help students feel competent in handling the learning material [17]. While in student-learning environments, the student responsibility for learning may nurture the need for autonomy and relatedness, there is some suggestion that incorporating lectures in a student-centered learning environment may help to overcome the challenges that students encounter.

An alternative to traditional lectures is hybrid instruction, which is also known as blended instruction. A typical hybrid course would contain elements of both teacher-centered instruction as well as student-centered learning, and suggested by some to have brought the best of both worlds [18].

This study follows the suggestion for combining teacher-centered and student-centered teaching methods and will investigate the challenges faced by students from diverse backgrounds as they experience the hybrid approach to teaching a 1st year marketing course.

In order to consider the challenges faced by first year students from diverse backgrounds, it is necessary to consider the main categories of students concerned. As previously mentioned, this study examines four predominant groups, being: offshore international students; on-campus international students; domestic students and mature-age students. Each of these groups are likely to experience different challenges, however there are also likely to be challenges that are common across all groups.

For new international students, the challenges encountered include: dealing with cultural differences; separation from family and friends; language barriers; and emotional and mental health problems [19]. For international students studying on-campus in Australia from countries where English is not the primary language, this can create a very significant challenge for their study. This factor alone can impact many aspects of their lives, including: making friends with native English speakers, understanding course materials; finding study partners and feelings of isolation [20]. In addition cultural difference between home countries and the country of study can impact first year student's adaption to a new environment. International students with different cultural backgrounds may perceive a learning environment differently and can further amplify language difficulties since students may lack the background knowledge to understand dialogue and local colloquiums [21].

For mature age distance students challenges experienced in their 1st year of study include: practical and emotional barriers, skills and learning styles, and social interaction. Practical problems such as

role and financial pressures, emotional struggles, family commitments and ongoing financial stress from increased cost of study are commonly cited challenges [22]. In addition, mature students may feel isolated and have negative perceptions of themselves as learners, creating anxiety and fear of failure [23].

Preliminary Model

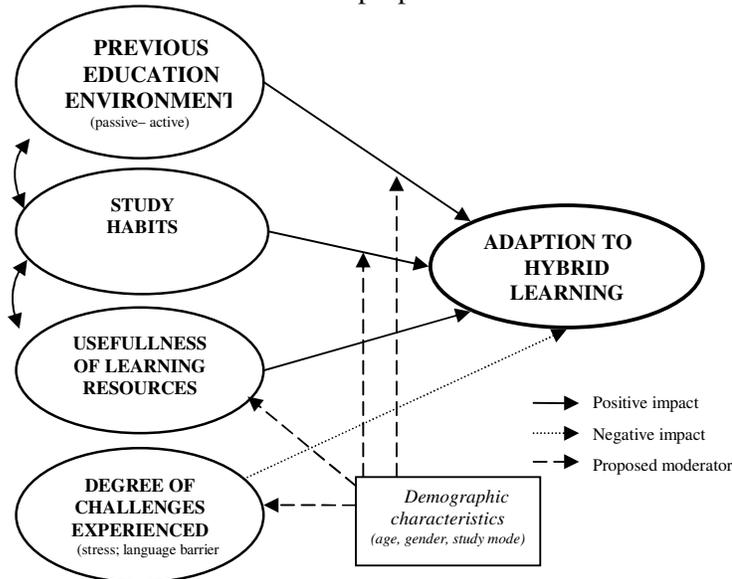Figure 1 is presented below which demonstrates the proposed model.

Figure 1. Preliminary Model—Challenges of 1st year students from diverse backgrounds.

This model proposes that adaption to a hybrid learning environment such as experienced in a 1st year marketing course will be positively influenced by a) previous education environment; b) study habits and (c) the usefulness of the course learning resources. Secondly, adaption to a hybrid learning environment is proposed to be negatively impacted by the degree of challenges experienced in adapting such as stress; language barriers; cultural barriers. These relationships are likely to be moderated by demographic characteristics such as age, gender, and study mode etc. These constructs may also have some interaction between them.

Future research using this preliminary model will be conducted in a large 1st year marketing course in Australia where a typical cohort of students includes international on-campus students, international offshore students, domestic students, high-school graduates (both on-campus & distance), mature age students (both on-campus & distance) and students from a diversity of backgrounds, cultures and experiences. The study will be conducted over several semesters with student numbers in excess of 1000 students per year. This longitudinal study will allow measurement of student challenges across different cohorts of students and different study practices.

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