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Insights into Departure Intention: A Qualitative Case Study

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Efforts to address attrition rates at universities have been driven by Tinto's (1975) model of student engagement with its focus on student: (a) pre entry attributes; (b) academic engagement; and (c) social engagement. Using an ethnographic approach, the study involves interviews with business students to explore the links between these aspects and departure intention. The results demonstrate that pre entry attributes were an important influence on student departure intention whereas a student's academic and social experiences were less influential. The analysis provides insights for educators and in particular business educators in the development of strategies to address various aspects of student engagement and attrition.

Introduction

The aim of this exploratory study is to investigate students' views about engagement and departure intention from university studies. Using aspects of Tinto's (1975) model of student engagement, including pre entry attributes, academic and social experiences, the study utilises interviews with a selection of first and second year business students to gain insights about the reasons why they contemplated departure from university. This qualitative approach involves discussion with students about their experiences and perceptions of engagement with university in contrast to the many studies that have used surveys of students' experiences about departure intention (e.g. Krause et al., 2005: Coates, 2010).

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Higher education systems, particularly in the United Kingdom and Australia have recognised the importance of understanding, monitoring and addressing student departure, particularly in undergraduate years of study (Krause, 2005). The focus on student departure has in part been driven by national policy imperatives in each country, but also other factors that link closely with the quality of the student experience in an increasingly competitive higher education sector. Therefore, when a student departs university the costs for both parties are significant. For students there is the loss of earnings and career mobility (Baum et al., 2010) while for universities the costs can comprise the loss of tuition income, financial aid, and loss of staff (Gabb et al., 2006). Attrition[1] therefore leads to a waste of tax-payer money and potential under-utilisation of society's human capital.

The challenges currently facing Australian universities such as decreased proportion of public funding, changes to migration policy and the removal of capped enrolments have made it more difficult to attract and retain students (Scott et al., 2008; Ross, 2010). Not surprisingly, an increased emphasis has been placed on educational research aimed at understanding and managing students' engagement in effective learning (Australian Council of Educational Research [ACER], 2009) in a bid to reduce attrition rates.

Although much research has been conducted into the relationship between student engagement and attrition, efforts to isolate the main student experiences responsible for student attrition are increasingly difficult as student cohorts have become more diversified. Elliott (2002) found that a clearer picture of students' backgrounds and needs led to student attrition approaches that were better targeted to individual student requirements.

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[1] Attrition refers to the loss of students from the institution between years of selected higher education courses (Department of Education, Science and Training [DEST], 2004, 1).

This study uses a research approach involving interviews with business students that focuses on their experiences at university. The participants in this study are undergraduate business students at a large multi campus dual sector university located in the Western suburbs of Melbourne. The university has one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse student cohorts in Australia, being in the top 10 universities in Australia in terms of the proportion of low socio-economic status (SES) students and language diversity – where approximately 50 per cent of the business students are international students. All interviews were conducted in the Western suburbs of Melbourne.

The analysis of interview data incorporates Tinto's theoretical framework to explore business student departure intention via the following factors: pre entry attributes; social engagement; and academic engagement. The focus on students' attitudes and behaviours, as reflecting their own personal attributes as well as institutional considerations, is in contrast to other attrition studies. In this way the research addresses prior criticism that the importance of the individual's circumstances has been underestimated in assessing decisions to stay or withdraw from studies (Brunsden et al., 2000; Laing and Robinson, 2003). Accordingly, the research objectives of this study are to:

  i. Assess the link between student pre entry attributes on departure intention; and
  ii. Analyse student feedback on academic and social engagement factors in relation to departure intention.

The significance of this study is that it utilises descriptions of student experiences of university via interviews, to explore individual characteristics (pre entry attributes), academic and social engagement linked with intended departure. The study also examines broad institutional notions of academic and social engagement as effective means of decision making. In this respect the paper builds on the earlier work of Robinson et al. (2007) by providing rich descriptions of the reasons why students contemplate departure from university.

The following section provides an overview of the prior literature on the relationship between student engagement and departure intention relevant to this study. The subsequent section describes the research design and approach. The paper concludes with implications for educators, limitations of the study and opportunities for further research.

Literature Overview

Pre-entry attributes

According to Tinto's (1975) interactionist longitudinal theory of student retention, a student's decision to persist or drop out is initially influenced by their pre entry attributes which deal with background characteristics, skills and abilities, and prior schooling. Hence pre entry attributes can include, but are not limited to, gender, language background, socio-economic status (SES), entry pathway and grade performance. These initial influences however vary over time. For instance, Chapman and Pascarella (1983) and Brunsden et al. (2000) claim that the greater the level of academic and social integration the less likely it is that a student will drop out. Tinto therefore recommends that departure intention can be reduced by increasing the levels of social and academic engagement of students (Tinto, 1995; 1997; 2003).

Notions of social and academic engagement under a Tinto framework

As the many academic studies on student engagement demonstrate (Braxton et al., 2000; Yorke, 2000; Kuh, 2003; Zhao and Kuh, 2004; Krause et al., 2005; Tinto and Pusser, 2006), a student's engagement improves as they become more involved in both social and academic activities. Robinson et al. (2007), advance the social and academic notion into issues of university and non-university led support systems. Specifically, non-university support centres on family and friends outside the university while university-led systems can consist of induction and timetabling. These dimensions of support

are viewed by students in terms of material resources, information and guidance (university-led system) and encouragement/support from non-university systems. The manner in which they interact can impact a student's departure decision.

The focus on social and academic aspects are also supported by the work of Willcoxson (2010) who denotes that Tinto's concepts of academic and social integration offer clear focal points for those seeking to reduce attrition rates. The issue of integration, Tinto (2003) points out, can occur along two dimensions: academic and social. Academic integration occurs when students become attached to the intellectual life of the college, while social integration occurs when students create relationships and connections outside of the classroom. For instance, students who develop connections to individuals, participating in clubs, or engaging in academic activities, are more likely to persist than those who remain on the periphery. Although academic and social integration are two analytically distinct concepts, they interact with and enhance one another which encourage persistence (Karp et al., 2008).

For this study, the term engagement is used instead of integration. As Kuh (2003) identifies, this term has developed over time through the efforts of several theorists and educational researchers. It has evolved from the studies of student involvement (Astin, 1984), and interaction and integration (Tinto, 1995; 1997; 2003), and is now used to describe the effort, interest, and time that students invest in meaningful educational experiences. Kuh goes on to define student engagement as "the time and energy that students devote to educationally sound activities inside and outside of the classroom, and the policies and practices that institutions use to induce students to take part in these activities" (Kuh, 2003, p. 25).

With respect to the notions of involvement and participation which link to student retention and satisfaction (Tinto, 1993); Astin (1977) describes involvement as the time and effort expanded by students in activities that relate directly to the institution and its program. Naturally, issues of involvement and participation impact student engagement. According to Roberts and McNeese (2010), Tinto

(1993) felt that students who were not very involved – or did not participate greatly – in campus activities were less likely to be engaged with their learning experience or engaged with their fellow students via interaction. Specifically, this involvement/engagement was more challenging for transfer students, who were often overwhelmed when entering a new institution.

Academic engagement and departure intention

Teaching quality

Teaching quality is an important aspect in retaining students, particularly at first year level (McInnis, 2001; Cuseo, 2003; Krause et al., 2005) and it has been a consistent theme in Australia in various studies of student experience (e.g. McInnis and James, 1995). Apart from this, teaching quality is also important because it is capable of being controlled to some extent by a university's own efforts. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that retention can be increased by staff members effectively engaging with students via high quality teaching (Martinez, 2001; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; Devlin and Samarawickrema, 2010).

Administrative support

The administrative support services of a university play an important role in assisting all students with their enrolment, progression and completion of academic studies. According to Scott et al. (2008) and Jackling and Natoli (2011), student queries in areas such as enrolment offers and processes, speed of application, addressing timetable clashes, and length of queue during enrolment, significantly impact on intended departure. These findings are also confirmed by Martinez (2001), Cuseo (2003), Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), and Willcoxson (2010) who concluded that retention could be improved by the quality of academic advisory services and administrative support.

Assessment activities

A central component of student engagement relates to assessment since it can increase student engagement through shared experiences, e.g. group work (Zhao and Kuh, 2004). Further, as Kift and Nelson (2005) indicate, clear assessment tasks are an important aspect for easing student transition to university.

Social engagement and departure intention

Interaction with peers and staff

Genuine interaction between students and staff is crucial to fostering student engagement. As Cuseo (2003) states, there exists a well-established association between contact and retention, where the more frequent the contact between staff and students, the less likely students are to depart. This is supported by Krause et al. (2005) who found that frequent peer interaction led to greater engagement with learning.

Clubs and societies

The role of a university's clubs and societies is often paramount to getting students engaged early and often. Clubs and societies can help students connect with each other, the campus and the wider community (Schier and Curtin, 2009).

Employing Tinto's framework

Although Tinto's theory is well-known, it has drawn criticism from some scholars who claim his theory arises from a context of US residential colleges and universities (Braxton et al., 1997; Braxton and Hirschy, 2005). This, they purport, differs from the university experience in many other countries (Yorke, 1999; Zimitat, 2006). Others have claimed the model's concentration on institutional influences on attrition at the expense of external factors affecting individual students' decisions to withdraw, represents a limitation in its use (Cabrera et al., 1993). Despite these criticisms, the underlying

structure of the Tinto model has provided researchers with a useful tool to investigate attrition and identify aspects of student background and experience that lead to improved retention. Moreover, given that the Tinto model is an interactionist longitudinal theory of student retention, it is as a whole very difficult to test in one study. Thus, as Brunsden et al. (2000) claim, almost all researchers selectively use parts of Tinto's model rather than address the entire model. This paper adopts a similar selective approach to the use of the Tinto model. In context of the literature review above, the study will examine the link between pre entry attributes, social engagement and academic engagement on departure intention. Thus, the following research questions are posed:

> **RQ1:** Which business student pre entry attributes are likely to result in a student contemplating departure from university?
>
> **RQ2:** To what extent are social and academic engagement factors likely to influence departure intention?
>
> **RQ3:** What types of pre-entry attributes influence academic or social engagement?

Research Design and Approach

Research Design

This study used qualitative data to identify influences on student engagement as well as explore more fully results from prior quantitative studies linked to intended student departure (Willcoxson, 2010; Willcoxson and Wynder, 2010). The qualitative data were acquired from a pool of thirty-five students who had responded to a larger quantitative study indicating that they were willing to be interviewed about their experiences of university life. Of these thirty-five business students, 13 students were randomly selected to participate in an interview. Ten interviews were undertaken based in part on: (i) student availability for interview within a given time frame; and (ii) sufficient coverage of student engagement and departure intention for the researchers to be satisfied that there had been adequate re-occurrence of themes (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Lucas, 2001; Guest et al., 2006). A semi structured interview

approach to data collection was employed as it is most closely aligned with an ethnographic qualitative research method (Fielding, 2008a, 2008b; Richards and Morse, 2007) since an emphasis was placed on the life history approach of the education experience of students (Ashworth et al., 2003).

The semi structured interviews consisted of eight open ended questions developed in advance, along with prepared probes broadly based around Tinto's model of student engagement (see Appendix). The interviews were designed to obtain students' descriptions of their 'lived' experiences of university (Kvale, 1996). The responses to the interview questions also formed the basis of the coding of thick descriptions to examine student departure intention through the use of a matrix model (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

The interviews were conducted in the Western suburbs of Melbourne over a two week period. During this time, 10 interviews were conducted (excluding the two pilot interviews conducted at an earlier stage). The interview comprised a script of eight open ended questions. Each participant was also allowed time to add information or provide related information that the questions did not probe. Although students were allotted one hour for the interview, the time taken ranged between 30 and 50 minutes. All participants were provided documentation concerning the purpose of the study and informed consent was audio recorded prior to the commencement of the interviews. The responses were audio recorded by the interviewer and were professionally transcribed in English and stored in an electronic database.

Given that this study develops insights on high-level overarching themes, Guest et al. (2006, p. 78) suggest that a sample of six interviews may be sufficient to enable development of meaningful themes and useful interpretation. As we were interested in high-level, overarching themes, the prior research suggests that our sample size of 10 was satisfactory (see Seymour, 2013).[2] As Miles and

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[2] Other researchers have demonstrated that a small number of interviews are viable. For example, Nielsen and Landauer (1993) demonstrated that six

Huberman (1994) state, interview panels of this proportion are not unusual in qualitative research.

Sample Characteristics

After conducting two pilot interviews that resulted in minor amendments to the structure of the questions to improve clarity, interviews were completed. Table 1 below provides the respondent profile for all participating students. It shows that there was an even split of males and females (50% each). In addition, six of the 10 students were identified as international students indicating that their permanent residence was not in Australia while three were in their first-year of study.

In terms of academic background, three of the four domestic (local) students had entered from the traditional secondary school pathway and the only mature age student had entered via Technical and Further Education (TAFE). Interviewees were undertaking a range of business majors and typically international students were more prominent in the accounting discipline with three of six undertaking this major. The grade point average (GPA) showed that overall the students' academic performance was relatively uniform, with Student 9 being one exception at the upper level (GPA = 82) and Student 4 with a GPA of 46 the exception at the lower level.

Data Analysis

Based on the type of data collection, the ethnographic research method adopted in this study represented a means of classifying and displaying relationships among objects within a classification system. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using the qualitative analysis package NVivo 8.

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evaluators (participants) can uncover 80% of the major usability problems within a system, and that after about twelve evaluators this diagnostic number tends to level off at around 90%.

Table 1: Profile of Respondents

Student No.	Age	Gender	International / Domestic	Entry pathway	Grade point average first year	Grade point average second year	First year studies at Uni.
Student 1	19	Female	Domestic	Secondary School	69	63	Yes
Student 2	44	Male	Domestic	TAFE	69	67	Yes
Student 3	21	Male	International	Overseas	62	62	No
Student 4	25	Male	International	Overseas	46	61	No
Student 5	21	Male	International	Overseas	67	77	No
Student 6	18	Male	Domestic	Secondary School	46	LOA	Yes
Student 7	23	Female	International	Overseas	60	67	No
Student 8	22	Female	International	Overseas	66	38	No
Student 9	24	Female	Domestic	Secondary School	82	Graduated	No
Student 10	22	Female	International	Overseas	71	67	No

Note: LOA = Leave of absence

A number of thematic nodes were created in accordance with issues that had been explored in the interviews. The raw interview data were coded by associating sentences of the transcript with a related issue at a corresponding node.

After the first reading, several key nodes in NVivo were developed to form two parent nodes: academic engagement and social engagement. After re-reading extracts of all transcripts classified under each conceptual heading, individual 'queries' were conducted on the four main attributes of academic engagement including teaching quality, interaction with staff and peers, assessment and administrative support. In terms of social engagement, two categories were formed: interaction with peers and staff, as well as clubs and societies. Queries were also undertaken to assess relationships with responses on departure intention. This approach comprises the basis of the matrix (Table 2) which highlights relationships among variables linked to Tinto's model. It also forms the basis for the discussion below.

Academic engagement

Memo of student responses to teaching quality

Based on the reading of the interview transcripts, a summary memo on teaching quality was prepared. Teaching was viewed by some interviewees as being of high quality. For example, Student 6 commented that:

> … the course coordinators and the academic staff have gone above and beyond to make sure that if a student is willing to put in the hard yards, they are also willing to meet you half way and give you extra help, so from that perspective it's been really good.

Other students, (e.g. Students 1, 3, 4 and 10) provided mixed responses, reflecting both positive and negative aspects, about the quality of teaching. For instance, addressing the students by name and being friendly in the class were examples of enhanced engagement, as students felt valued in the classroom. Conversely, when students were not identified by name, particularly in small

class settings, this exacerbated feelings of lack of connectedness with the university. Further, content knowledge was important with lecturers and tutors able to demonstrate a good knowledge of the subject matter deemed to demonstrate high quality teaching. Those that could only recite textbook answers made students question the quality of their education.

There were however three students (Students 7, 8 and 9), that provided, for the most part, negative comments about teaching quality. Lack of expertise in the academic discipline, use of out-dated PowerPoint slides year after year and an unwillingness to engage with students in the class were the main issues which were identified as evidence of poor quality teaching. Another issue regarding the quality of teaching dealt with teachers whose first language was not English, as it was felt this factor often restricted the potential for adequate staff interaction with students.

Memo of student responses to administrative support

The interviews undertaken in this study revealed that the enrolment and re-enrolment process was an important source of dissatisfaction with administrative support services. Of those who were dissatisfied, all highlighted the issue of time taken for enrolment and the delays in the process. As Student 7 stated:

> … Nowadays, everything should be done on the internet… [at this university you] fill in millions of forms and it was a huge line to wait and it was like all [enrolment is done] manually… I can't understand why it can't be online.

There was also evidence of dissatisfaction with the administrative aspect of course/subject change processes. For instance, although two students found the process satisfactory in terms of ease and speed of amendments to course/units, four students had identified difficulties with the process. These deficiencies related to procedural complexity and a lack of awareness of processes by administrative staff. Student 8 commented that:

> It's just frustrating, it's incredibly tiring and tedious having to talk to ten people about the same thing and then feel like they're not listening to you …

The results show that only one student (Student 10) had emerged from their dealings with the administrative personnel with a purely positive experience. The vast majority (seven students) had negative experiences.

Memo of student responses to assessment activities

In exploring student views of the assessment, this study examined a range of issues including perception of group work (presentations and assignments) as well as the quality of the feedback received from academic staff as part of the assessment process.

All the students interviewed for this study had participated in presentations except for one (Student 3). The students expressed mixed responses about having any specific preparatory support for presentations from their teachers. At least five students (Students, 1, 4, 5, 7 and 8) provided positive responses, such as Student 5 who offered:

> Throughout the semester [the lecturer] kept giving us hints on how to do our presentation... it was quite a good experience because I had a feeling that I was doing a real thing. Even with the small presentations we received support...

> This was reinforced by Student 7, who opined that:
> Information about the presentation [was] quite good... my confidence level [increased] for other presentations in other subjects... I felt more confident...

In contrast, with respect to group work assignments, some students described the situation as 'infuriating' and 'frustrating' when group members did not contribute and could not adequately present. A similar issue was echoed in the response of Student 5.

Three students (Students 1, 2 and 9) specifically made negative comments regarding group work. For example, Student 1 stated that:

> I didn't think it was fair if you end up doing some work for others and they get your High Distinction [grade].

She added that she would prefer to work with 'like-minded people who actually want to get the good marks'.

On the issue of feedback on assessment tasks, mixed response were provided. When asked whether the feedback was adequate or not, five students (Students 2, 3, 5, 7 and 8) indicated that it was not the case. As Student 2 stated:

> I receive a feedback sheet that is attached to the documents… so there is not face to face contact, no advice about what could have been done better or improved.

Overall, the results of the assessment activities memo show that most of the students had a mixture of positive and negative views towards assessment activities.

Social engagement

Memo of student responses to interaction with peers and staff

In this study, student interaction explores issues such as students' intention and practice of attending lectures and tutorials, asking questions in class and also communication with the academics outside of class.

Regarding class attendance, the majority of students were positive, indicating they attended most of the lectures and tutorials. Three of the interviewees remarked that they preferred to go to the tutorial classes since lectures provided little scope for interaction. Student 8 commented that:

> I would always attend tutorials. Lectures, I go to if I think I am going to get something out of them. So if I establish in the first two or three weeks that the lecturer is just going to read off the slides, I don't go to that [lecture] anymore.

With respect to asking questions in class (lecture or tutorial), almost all students commented that they participated in class discussions. Seven students indicated that they asked questions when they required clarification, felt like voicing their opinion or when they were asked to give a response. However, one of the international students (Student 7) mentioned that she felt 'shy and sometimes embarrassed to ask because of her accent'.

Communication outside the classroom is also an important aspect of interaction between staff and students. All the students interviewed in this study stated that they have contacted teaching staff outside the classroom, with email being the preferred means of communication. Generally, all the respondents were satisfied with the reply time and quality of responses received.

There was a noticeable lack of comment on peer interaction in the interviews, with only two of ten interviewees mentioning this factor. Student 7 was disappointed about peer interaction as stated below:

> I don't often see people hanging around, this seems to be more of a business style campus. People come, do their lectures and then leave and I don't think that necessarily encourages a good learning environment…

Overall the results of the memos related to interaction support, showed that five students had genuine positive experiences with peers and staff, while two students were negatively disposed in this aspect.

Memo of student responses to clubs and societies

In exploring the role of clubs and societies in fostering social engagement, the majority of responses fell into two categories: (i) the

effectiveness of current clubs and societies to promote their activities; and (ii) impact of a multi campus environment. For instance, although Student 4 had joined a club his feelings were that he 'had to use his own initiative' and that the university 'should definitely be more proactive in raising awareness among students'. This was reiterated by Student 10 who searched on the website for a club to join, stating that insofar as being aware of clubs, 'most of it depends on the student'.

There were positive aspects about social engagement, for instance, Student 1 felt that the multi campus environment meant that:

> There isn't a large volume [of clubs] but because it's small, everyone kind of knows everyone and it's a healthy environment.

In addition, Student 2 enjoyed the social atmosphere of university, even though it came via informal networks:

> ... We used to get together at least once a week and have a social group just conversation, chat, catch up ...it was an informal process.

It would appear that the majority of the students (six) in this study had a negative experience re: clubs and societies. These students cited either the multi campus environment (Students 5, 8 and 9), or the inadequate attempts to promote social events via clubs and societies (Students 4, 7 and 10).

Interview matrix

The student interview matrix summarises the experience of the interviewees on the aforementioned five factors of student academic and social engagement experiences discussed in the summary memos. These factors were also organised alongside the pre entry attributes dealing with gender, international origin and education entry pathway, as well as their departure intention (see Table 2 below). This structure reflects the Tinto model.

Table 2: Student Interview Matrix

Student	Gender	Intl	E/P	Teaching quality			Administrative support			Assessment activities			Interaction (peers & staff)			Clubs & Societies			DI
#				Pos	Neg	Mix	Pos	Neg	Mix	Pos	Neg	Mix	Pos	Neg	Mix	Pos	Neg	Mix	
1	F	N	S/Sch			√			√	√			√			√			Y
2	M	N	TAFE	√				√				√	√			√			N
3	M	Y	O/S			√			√			√	√						N
4	M	Y	O/S			√		√		√					√		√		N
5	M	Y	O/S	√				√				√	√				√		N
6	M	N	S/Sch	√				√		√									Y
7	F	Y	O/S		√			√				√			√		√		Y
8	F	Y	O/S		√			√				√		√			√		N
9	F	N	S/Sch		√			√				√		√			√		Y
10	F	Y	O/S			√	√						√				√		N

Note: Intl: International; DI: Departure Intention; E/P: Entry Pathway; F: Female; M: Male; Y: Yes; N: No; S/Sch: Secondary School; O/S: Overseas; Pos: Positive; Neg: Negative; Mix: Mixed

The five factors (i.e. teaching quality, assessment activities, administrative support, interaction with staff and students, and clubs and societies) were classified into three response categories: positive, negative and mixed. Notions of reliability have been fulfilled in this case by stipulating clearly what each of these responses denotes through a process of discussion and agreement among the participating investigators. The section that follows analyses the results of the student interview matrix.

Matrix analysis of departure intention and engagement

As shown in Table 2, of the students interviewed, four had considered departing the university (see Table 2 column DI [Departure Intention] = Y [Yes]). An analysis of the interviews with these four students (Students 1, 6, 7 and 9), as well as their pre entry attributes, is presented below.

Student 1 had identified positively with the social experiences of university but negatively to her academic experiences. She had particular difficulty with administrative support services that had rejected her application to transfer courses. She also indicated that the university was not on her preference list when she initially sought a university place which exacerbated her desire to depart. This result is in keeping with Krause et al. (2005) who found that entry preference lists of students are a factor in student departure intention.

Student 6 was positive about his academic experiences but was less forthcoming re his social experiences. Although Student 6 had contemplated departing the university these circumstances were more closely aligned to a disability that impacted on his performance. Despite acknowledging the significant support from the university's disability support services, this student took a leave of absence at the commencement of the second year of his studies.

Student 7, a female overseas student in her second year of study, did not cite any positive academic or social experiences. Her main issue related to the teaching quality (the English language level of certain teachers) as well as the university's low ranking relative to other universities within geographic proximity. Despite these major concerns, Student 7 continued her studies at this university because she did not want to go through the 'whole visa eligibility procedure again'. This is indicative of the higher education (HE) institutional system international students experience where there is less flexibility to transfer between HE providers compared to domestic students.

The final student who had considered departing (Student 9) was not able to identify positive experiences in terms of interaction with staff and peers or with extra curricula activities. The student indicated that she only continued at the university because her course was not offered at other universities. The GPA for this student of 82 was well above others interviewed. The findings for this student reinforces the prior work of Willcoxson and Wynder (2010) indicating that clear choice of major is associated with persistence rather than withdrawal from university studies.

The matrix analysis of the above four students showed that a number of pre entry attributes such as: university preference listing; the course offerings; personal circumstances (disability); and visa eligibility procedures were important considerations in departure intention

A detailed descriptive account of the results for the students who did not consider departure is not presented in this paper. However, the analysis for both cohorts - students who had considered departing and those that had not – demonstrated that the levels of academic and social experiences are mitigated by a range of pre entry attributes. Specifically, pre entry attributes such as: Is the student from overseas? Is the course offered elsewhere? Was the university high on the student's original preference list? were important in shaping student departure intention.

In addressing RQ3, Table 2 shows that pre-entry attributes can impact on the level of academic and social engagement. For instance, female international students were most likely to have a negative teaching quality experience and negative administrative support experience while there was a mixed response regarding assessment activities. Regarding social engagement, female international students were unanimous in terms of negative experiences with the university's clubs and societies while there was a mixed response to their perceived interaction with peers and staff members. Overall, no positive experiences were cited from this cohort regarding their academic or social experiences at the university.

For male international students, no discernible pattern could be identified from Table 2 re: academic engagement. However this cohort experienced negative social engagement experiences with regard to the university's clubs and societies as well as their interaction with peers and staff members.

Male domestic students had an overall mixed academic engagement experience which consisted of a positive teaching quality experience and a negative administrative support experience. Unfortunately, the social experience aspect is difficult to identify but it seems to favour a positive outcome. With respect to female domestic students, no identifiable pattern could be determined for either their academic or social experiences.

The above results suggest that it is international students who are more likely to be less engaged (academically and socially) compared to domestic students. The international students in this study typically arrived via an alternate pathway other than directly from secondary school. This result aligns with Tinto's model (1993) which suggests that engagement is more challenging for transfer students, entering a new institution.

Conclusions

The objective of this study was to interrogate interview data to explore academic and social student engagement experiences together with pre entry attributes linked with student departure intention. Specifically, a student matrix was developed to assess these links via Tinto's (1975) model of student retention. The results of this study showed that pre entry attributes were an important influence on student departure intention (RQ1) whereas the impact that students' social and academic experiences had on departure intention were mixed (RQ2). Thus the findings lend support to the view that integration is heavily weighted by the individual's own characteristics as represented by their pre entry attributes.

Implications for business educators

The results of this study provide support for the view that a model of student engagement as a means of predicting departure needs to emphasise pre entry attributes and their sustained importance throughout the university experience (Robinson et al., 2007) as well as institutional factors. This finding has particular implications for those who have responsibility for the transition and retention of students and in formulating and implementing retention strategies. Primarily, as Brunsden et al. (2000) asserted, attrition strategies should focus on factors related to the individual in addition to the broader institutional notions of academic and social experiences as espoused by the Tinto model. Although providing social and academic experiences are part of a university's domain, the challenge is to promote student engagement in such a way that students develop a sense of commitment and engagement with their studies that foster a sense of belonging to their university. Despite concerted efforts by universities, these challenges are notoriously difficult to overcome. Furthermore the results of this study would suggest that the current experiences and level of engagement vary substantially for the individual student.

In terms of the practical contribution for educators the results of this study have a number of implications. First, in terms of the quality of the learning experience, the results highlight the importance of teaching quality in enhancing the student experience. The interviews with students indicated that in some instances, academics lag considerably behind in terms of the use of technology as well as a lack of awareness of the student audience. Students were able to readily identify a lack of discipline expertise of staff, particularly those who read from power point slides and used outdated material in lectures. This feedback is not new to universities however the findings highlight specific aspects of teaching quality that are capable of improvement, for example in Continuing Professional Development (CPD) activities for academics, including use of technology as well as an awareness of the links between learning objectives, assessment tasks and learning outcomes.

Second, the results provide further insights as to the nature of the issues that students have with institutional engagement, especially with the administrative aspects of their academic experience. The findings illustrate the need to ensure that administrative staff are aware of the importance of 'customer service' when dealing with students, particularly as they are often the first source of contact with the university for new students. There also appeared to be a lack of consistency in information dissemination across administrative divisions (see for example, comment from Student 8). Therefore not only do additional administrative resources need to be provided, there is also evidence from this study that CPD should be provided to administrative staff to ensure awareness of university policies and procedures and consistency in application.

Third, one of the main outcomes from this study is the need to concentrate institutional efforts on individual student profiles to address students' intention to depart. As an acknowledgement of the issues surrounding student engagement (or lack thereof) the university where this study was conducted, has more recently provided support mechanisms for students from diverse

backgrounds via a range of transition and retention strategies including a range of academic and social support activities for students. As Harrison (2006, p. 389) states it is useful to consider a model of persistence rather than withdrawal. He outlines that such a model

> "… would find its legitimacy in understanding that students are attached to an institution by a network of connections of varying strength: some academic, some social and some personal."

Limitations of the study

Although providing a rich source of data about students' engagement and departure intentions, the analysis has some limitations. For instance, since the study focuses on one university, it is acknowledged that the findings of this study are not necessarily generalisable. However as outlined by Leveson et al. (2013), there are benefits in single institutional research study designs, given the opportunity to control for discipline or institutional culture, that prior studies have demonstrated increase complexity in multi institutional studies (e.g. Danaher et al., 2008). In addition, qualitative studies involving interviews by their nature incorporate rich descriptions however there are limitations about the way in which rich data can be condensed, in this instance into variables reflected in a model of student engagement and departure intention. A great deal of data therefore remains 'hidden' within the classification and coding system. Another limitation of the findings relates to the number of interviews conducted where a greater sample would have strengthened the study's findings. Further, there was only one researcher involved in the coding of interview data, although three investigators were involved in classifying the response categories for the interview matrix. Although multiple independent coders potentially contribute significantly to the reliability and validity of the coding process, there are cost/benefit trade-offs in their use that need to be determined in the context of the study (Lillis, 1999). As this was an exploratory study, designed to inform future research, the limited use of validation processes need to be viewed in this

context. Finally, this study investigates intentions to withdraw rather than actual withdrawals.

Areas for future research

A useful extension of this study would be to address more fully the characteristics of individuals that relate to departure intention, including university and course preference as well as entry pathway and academic performance relative to course preference. Given the diversity in individual characteristics of students intending to depart, there is potential to investigate the management of student expectations relative to the quality of the university experience. Additionally, a longitudinal qualitative study that tracks students' experiences of university and the factors underpinning retention and departure intention is worthy of further research. The views of academics to evaluate the academic engagement of students would also be a useful extension of this study as there is value of having impact from multiple sources, apart from students, to address departure intentions.

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Appendix: Student Engagement Interview Questions

Tinto's Academic Experiences

1. Overall what is your opinion about the quality of the teaching and learning experience you have had so far at this institution?
2. Do you ask questions in tutorials and lectures? Why? Does your teacher encourage discussion?

> How often do you go to lectures and tutorials?
> Prompts: all the time, 80% of the time or something else: Why?

3. Do you have to make presentations in class? Yes/No, If yes then: What type of support, if any, do you have for preparing class presentations?
4. Do you receive feedback from your work (tests, assignments, etc.). If so, do you believe feedback is adequate? Is it returned in a timely fashion?
5. Have you had any dealings with the Faculty office re enrolment, change of study program, requests for special consideration etc. If so, what is you view of the service? What did you like/dislike?

> Comment on how each of the following possible issues have been dealt with?
> - timetable clashes; responsiveness of Faculty,
> - University staff queries,
> - length of queue during enrolment, and tutorial registration downtime.

Tinto's Social Experiences

6. How would you rate the orientation program to the university? How would you rate the level of social engagement? Prompts: very good, if so what did you like/dislike. Did not attend, then why?
7. How do you communicate with faculty outside of the classroom? (blackboard, email, cell phone).

Tinto's Departure Decision

8. Have you considered leaving this institution? If Yes why? If No why?