

Keeping up and keeping it together: Tertiary arts students managing health, family and self esteem

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Being a student in an Australian university involves more pressure, and makes more demands on that student and his or her support networks than ever before. The variety in the configurations of pressures, demands and responsibilities faced by students means that it is impossible to characterise a 'standard' student. Qualitative research undertaken to explore the situations of sixty undergraduate students in eleven focus groups at Monash University, has revealed that while the pressures are increasing, students generally approach their studies equipped with a good awareness of the difficulties they are likely to face. This awareness — along with a better capacity to manage pressure — increases as students' study programs advance. There is an increasing demand for students to engage in paid work to meet the costs of study; to participate in family life and maintain social support networks, and to care for their own health and well-being. These pressures can often present challenges for the University administration, and at times conflict with requirements on teaching staff. The changing and varied social and education realities of students need to be better incorporated into institutional arrangements.

Introduction

Monash University, along with most other Australian tertiary institutions, is actively engaged in developing practices and processes to improve student experiences and success. Among the key factors influencing student success are those relating to students' health and well-being and the study-life balance of undergraduate students, which will be a key focus in this analysis. The research presented is drawn from a larger qualitative research project, directed towards identifying the key challenges for Arts students at Monash University in successfully completing their studies. Funding was made available from the Faculty's allocation of the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund.

Some of the past initiatives designed to improve students' learning outcomes in Australian higher education generally, have involved institutional orientation programs to ease the transition from high school to university (Hillman, 2005; Kift, 2005; Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnes, 2005; Nelson, Kift, Humphreys & Harper, 2006); analysis of the psychological wellbeing of students (Fagan, 1993; Jones & Frydenberg, 1999; Cooke, Bewick, Barkham, Bradley & Auden, 2006); researching factors influencing student engagement in university life (McInnes, 2001; Krause, 2005); and the development of online resources and learning platforms to increase access to and flexibility in teaching and learning (Clerehan, 2003; Nelson et al, 2005).

In addition to the above developments, ongoing research is being conducted to assess the impacts on students of the increasing need for students to engage in paid work while studying (Lucas & Lammont, 1998; McInnes & Hartley, 2002; Vickers, Lamb & Hinkley, 2003; Rasmussen, 2006). Longitudinal research — so far conducted in Australia over a five year period — has uncovered a trend towards a deterioration in undergraduate students' financial situations, and an increase in students' needs for non-cash assistance: in terms of meals, accommodation, and the purchasing of text-books (Long & Hayden, 2001; James, Bexley, Devlin & Marginson, 2007). All these areas of change and associated research demonstrate the need for a continued awareness of the changing circumstances under which students are engaging in their tertiary studies. There has been less attention paid to the well-being of students after the transition from secondary school to university period is over: this research focuses specifically on this area.

This article focuses on one of five key themes emerging from data gathered from a broader study of eleven student focus groups. Participants were asked about issues involved in managing their study requirements; the impacts of paid work and family life; stressful semester times and coping strategies, in addition to questions about how the Faculty could better support students. This article discusses how students are managing issues concerning their health, self-esteem and personal relationships, and how these issues in turn affect their capacities to study effectively. The more human elements of teacher-student and student-peer-family relationships are often less visible, with institutional focus increasingly directed at the more macro-concerns of excellence in teaching and engagement, the issue of retention, and outcomes in student learning. This article aims to bring student-identified micro relationship issues into view.

Design

The aim of the broader study was to identify key work-life-study issues for Arts students studying in contemporary Australia. The study was funded by the Faculty of Arts at Monash University. Focus groups were chosen as a method for data collection because they offered the opportunity to identify substantive issues for students and gain in-depth insights while encompassing the views of larger sample than individual interviews. Hamel (2001) suggests that focus groups allow for “open discussion of topics under considerations and [the production of] an immediate analysis by collating the viewpoints of the participants” (2001, p.242). Ethical approval was obtained from the university ethics committee and informed consent was sought and obtained from each focus group participant.

Sample

Focus group participants were recruited using a number of methods. Posters were put in relevant public areas around the university and announcements were made in some lectures. In addition, bulk emails were sent to groups of students outlining the study. Students were invited to express interest by contacting a researcher. Details of the study were generally forwarded with an explanatory statement (except for one focus group where timelines made this difficult). Some students were encouraged by friends to attend;

all participants were provided with explanatory statements in the focus group setting. Monash University comprises multiple campuses; all Australian campuses were the venue of at least one focus group. Overall, there were eleven focus groups conducted between May and July 2007 and fifty-four students participated; six groups occurred at the larger metropolitan campuses (Clayton & Caulfield), four at the smaller outer suburban campus (Berwick), and one at the regional campus (Peninsula). Arts subjects are taught at each of these campuses. For all but one of the groups, two of the researchers were present. Two of the students were known to one of the researchers; only one was currently taught or counselled by anyone in the research team. Focus group discussions occurred in university rooms; catering was provided but no other rewards were offered. Numbers in focus groups varied with one or two in some, and nine or ten students in others. Focus groups took approximately one hour and all were audio taped. At the completion of the study, a number of students who wanted to attend but could not were offered the opportunity to respond to the questions via email. Three of those six student responses have been drawn upon here.

The students who participated ranged in age from eighteen to sixty years of age, with twenty eight participants aged between eighteen and twenty four years of age. Approximately half were single and half were partnered. Fourteen of the participants had direct caring responsibilities (ranging from one to five children), although others reported significant care activities. All participants were asked to fill in a short form outlining hours of work, living arrangements and care responsibilities. They were asked the following questions.

- Could you please tell us what the key issues are for you in managing your study requirements?
- How does paid work impact on how you manage study?
- What aspects of family life impact most on how you manage study?
- What times are most stressful for you in the semester?
- What strategies have you found useful in managing your different obligations?
- Have you any suggestions about how the Faculty could support you better?

Data analysis

Each focus group session was taped and fully transcribed. Initially the transcripts were read and five key themes were identified; these were expectations and assumptions; priorities; academic resources and support; completing assessments, and managing health, self-esteem and personal relationships. The last of these themes is the focus of this paper.

Transcripts were reviewed by the research team with the above themes and key issues in mind. Words and phrases were clustered around the themes. This method was adopted after Cameron (2001), where the participants' responses were used to shape interpretative categories.

Limitations to methodology

Students who participated in the focus groups were not randomly selected, as explained above. Therefore it could be assumed that the sample group who responded to the above mentioned call for participants were more willing to discuss the issues of study life balance and were therefore more likely to have thought about the issues than the broad group of students who did not choose to participate.

Managing student stress

There can be no doubt that one of the common frustrations for university lecturers and tutors towards the end of semester, is the ever-increasing flow of student requests for extensions. Many students make their requests for extensions armed with medical certificates, and an awareness of the extension policy of their faculty or department. Others do not, and make their often desperate and last-minute pleas without concern for the due process which faculties rely upon to attempt to keep disorder at a minimum. There is a sort of blindness in this institutional faith; a hope that if students simply read their subject guides and planned their work programs better, there would be no need to confront the many and varied human complexities these situations make visible.

Despite efforts to control and minimise student distress at the business end of semester, many students still appear to struggle with the demands and frustrations of producing quality work and getting it in on time. White (2006) neatly phrases this complex interface between the institution and the people who work within it. "Sitting within the context of the broader politics and economics of university governance and associated changes in university culture are the everyday practices of, and relationships between, teachers and students" (p.232). White also makes the somewhat discomfiting assessment that

At the personal level, learning and teaching are characterised by ambivalence, uncertainty and anxiety. The anxiety arises out of, among other things, uncertainty, frustration and the potential for shame, as well as struggles around dependence and independence, authority and control (2006, p.233).

For White, this anxiety and uncertainty is not just applicable to students. White notes that for teachers, "The anxiety rests on a sense that one is not quite what students or peers imagine one to be" (2006, p.234). Taken together, these observations suggest that students and teachers are partners in a very human process—students preparing for a career and teachers practicing one—which ultimately aims to bring success, achievement and fulfilment to both cohorts.

Additionally, recent research conducted in Australia around student expectations of higher education, particularly in the transition period from high-school to university has shown that the interface between students and academics in Australian universities are undergoing significant change (Kift, 2005; Krause et al, 2005). Research reported by James (2002) has shown that there is "significant change (occurring) in the relationship between universities and their student communities" (2002, p.72). James also notes that, "This

change is evident in the new relationships between higher education and work, the increasingly market-like forms of organisation of higher education, and the new expectations and priorities of students themselves” (2002, p.72).

This present study confirms the presence of these features in students’ accounts of their university experiences. University study for students may be ostensibly about entering into a learning program to further their professional aspirations, and therefore demanding a ‘professional’ code of behaviour and expectations on both sides. However, it is impossible to erase the human element from the equation. Stresses, guilt, sleep-deprivation, illness, loneliness, personal sacrifices, as well as feelings of failure and of not managing, are equal partners in many students’ — and teachers’ — experiences of university life.

Students are not characterised here as in need of ‘special’ treatment. Nor can the students interviewed be generalised as low achievers or lacking in commitment. Rather, this study confirms that students are socially situated individuals (Clegg et al, 2006) for whom life poses the same challenges that others face. Much recent research has shown that students are also frequently workers and / or carers; may have a place of responsibility within the structures of family, and usually need the social supports of friendships and personal relationships to maintain a sense of connectedness with the world (Lucas & Lammont, 1998; McInnes & Hartley, 2002; Leder & Forgasz, 2004, Clegg, Bradley & Smith, 2006). This paper argues therefore, that the realities of socially situated students need to be incorporated into institutional arrangements and expectations of contemporary student cohorts.

Family pressures and responsibilities

I’m overwhelmed by the school stuff. Disco tomorrow night, working bees, mother’s day stall, P&C, selling ... I got five notices yesterday, and I was like – it’s only been one day!

It doesn’t take a great deal of imagination to understand that students at university have complex lives; just like everyone else. This simple fact often escapes notice when decisions about structuring units and setting assignments are being made at the administrative level. There have been some studies which have examined students well-being in terms of how effectively they use university counselling services (Cooke et al, 2006) and at what times of the year stress is more likely to occur (Jones & Frydenberg, 1999) but there is less research on particular stressors and how they impact on study routines. Fagan (1994) found that university students demonstrated complex concerns about the ways “school, relationships with family and friends, and the future” interacted (p.247).

Assumptions about who students are, and what capacity they have to study effectively, are made routinely and for overwhelmingly pragmatic reasons. Individual tailoring is virtually impossible in the university setting, as the following descriptions of how life intervenes in study routines illustrate. In the quoted material below, all words in parentheses have been added by the authors to clarify meaning.

I used to get a lot done Sundays ... have (partner) home or Grandma, but then ... its brother-in-law's birthday one Sunday, then it was mother's day, then it was Grandma's this week, mum just said it's her partner's birthday and I said – five Sundays (gone)!

I am often tired and worried about other responsibilities when I try to study, but I am getting better at focusing when I have made the time to study because it is so precious. Before the baby my family did not really impact on my studying at all as most of them live interstate and I had plenty of time to study while my partner was working.

We have had a child since I commenced study and have another one on the way. This has significantly reduced my capacity to manage peak study loads (assessments due etc) at home. My study tends to be marginalised into the late PM early AM as a result. Further, my wife has had two very difficult pregnancies so I have often found myself being the primary carer in the house during these times -this is happening right now.

Regular study days are often difficult to maintain when a student finds new time restrictions in the form of children arise, or when family gatherings demand his or her presence. It is difficult to put study ahead of such responsibilities that may not initially appear to demand as much time and energy as is eventually required. Equally, unexpected events or changes in family dynamics can happen to over-turn the best laid plans, and demand an ongoing commitment from students:

My dad... spent the whole of last year in and out of hospital... then mum got diagnosed as-well... so when dad wasn't in (hospital), Mum was in. So, they have constant doctor's appointments and I'm expected to be able to drive them there and back.

I'm the taxi-driver at home now. It's like: "Take your sister to X, Y or Z!" - can you pick her up from this place at this time. One in the morning you get a phone call – the taxi didn't turn up, can you pick me up?

I've got a lot of responsibilities at home. I've got two younger siblings. ... I'm like the second mum. Uni is not the only thing I have. I have to work, literally, to help my mum out. They are still at high school. I have to buy the (text) books. So, it's not like, I'll come to uni and have fun – I have to juggle both (family and uni) and I have to work to survive.

This last quote demonstrates the extra responsibilities younger students still living at home may have to contribute to family life, beyond keeping their rooms clean and helping with the dishes. This student has to carry adult burdens alongside her study obligations, and is working to support her siblings; not just to afford consumer goods or to meet the expenses of contemporary youth culture. The following young student also has extraordinary demands to meet:

I'm an independent person who lives on her own and cares for her younger brother because of a problematic family life. I've been denied by Centrelink twice for any kind of financial help and haven't received a cent off either of my parents for the last two years. If I don't go to work every week to pay my rent I'm out of a home and so is my brother. I can't have no-where to live, and I don't want my brother to struggle as he is in year twelve this year, so work takes precedence sometimes over Uni, but I really don't wanna fail at Uni.

Apart from the kinds of major responsibilities canvassed above, the desire to study and to achieve goals for a future career, may often appear selfish in contrast to family needs: to both students and their families. The responsibility individuals have to maintain relationships is given an important place in almost every culture, and this conflict between needing to fulfil individual career or life enhancing goals—even if for an entire family's benefit—and the need to participate in and meet that family's needs, may cause strong feelings of guilt for students:

When you're doing family stuff you feel guilty because you're not studying ... and when you're studying you can't help (with family stuff) ... so I feel like I'm in constant guilt. ... Life is about a balance. I should be doing all those things, and I'm not doing anything well.

Yeah, with study, there's this constant sense of guilt too, I think, in a way, oh I should be doing this, oh I should be doing more study, because I'm doing this work now - I'm not studying, and as I said, it's the whole guilt thing - (work due) in two weeks. I should be doing some research. A presentation coming for our thesis. Gosh, should be speaking to my instructor, all that stuff and it's always going through your mind. So you're never free of the guilt when you're studying and that's the awful thing.

In answer to the question of how about family expectations had changed for students—in terms of now being a tertiary student compared to a secondary student—came the following responses:

(I) cop it heaps off my parents. All I get is 'Why aren't you studying? Why are you doing this? Why are you doing that?' I do a lot of stuff outside of just uni and I always cop it for never being home. Especially my mum is always asking how I am finding time to get things done. You manage to find time. You pull it off somehow but I think their expectations for me play a big part because I'm the first person in my direct family to go to uni... so my parents are demanding a lot. That makes it harder.

With my family it's a bit of a guilt trip type thing. They live a couple of hours away and so I'm expected to go home and see them on weekends and it's a few hours drive and I can't do anything over the weekend and I can't study or anything and if I haven't seen them for a few weekends so I go home and so it's

kind of hard to juggle staying here and needing to stay here and then wanting to see me and wanting to go home.

What families expect from their student member, and what students are able to provide, are frequently mismatched. Several students from a number of focus groups expressed the need to have space away from their homes to work; often after-hours. The need to be occasionally removed from the family environment in order to meet their study obligations is part of the process, and is a price many students are willing to pay to meet their study requirements. There are also other reasons for escape:

I've got young (son), he's twelve, and he doesn't understand that I don't consider the musings of Homer J. Simpson to be great literature. So I get sort of very frustrated having to live in a child's world for as long as I do, and I do go out and seek adult company, and to study I do have to come to the library. And so that's just part of the deal.

The responses above demonstrate a variety of commitments and responsibilities that students may have to carry, and that were in some cases not part of their original plan. But, life happens. This has required students to re-evaluate their plans, and commit to negotiating a tighter, less compromising fit between their evolving and changing situations and the more rigid university structure. All these students are still finding ways to make their study goals come to fruition, by evaluating their own resources and adjusting their expectations of themselves, "while dealing with the inescapably messy contingencies of being human" (Clegg et al, 2006, p.105). This altering of expectations may however entail a kind of 'settling' for what can be achieved in the available space between these competing demands. In answer to the question about difficulties in managing her study schedule one student answered:

In terms of selecting classes and scheduling, I must admit there would be classes that I wouldn't take because they were in the evenings or later in the afternoons or too early in the morning and that would create extra pressure from a family perspective. And because I'm not earning money, there's not (the money) coming in to allow for extra and after school care ... so I try and schedule during school hours.

This last response demonstrates that there are trade-offs and compromises that students have to make, which may not result in them taking the classes they might most wish to take, or indeed, achieving the kind of degree they might ideally seek. As James (2002) notes, "Students' expectations pertain to both quality (increasingly captured in "am I getting value for money?") and personal relevance ("is this course really right for me?") and are thus highly diverse and individual in character" (James, 2002, p.71). This persistent struggle between personal circumstances and the structure and expectations of the university experience may, but not necessarily, impact upon student's lives in more complex ways. So, what are some of the potential outcomes of the trade-offs and the compromises that students regularly make? How are these outcomes—often amounting to further barriers to success—then addressed by students?

Personal health, happiness and social relationships

All of the students interviewed for this research understood that being a University student entailed a big commitment. Indeed, choosing to attend a forum on balancing life with study demonstrates awareness that their university goals were not of secondary importance. But this pledge to persist, to keep up with the task as it unfolds, has its price for many students. Keeping it together in the face of the mounting challenges of producing quality school work, earning money, and being a participant in their relationships, is an additional challenge that must be faced. Cooke et al demonstrated that university is often an anxious time for students; especially in the first year of study (2006, p.515). This student for example, faced the challenges of ill-health on top of her university and family commitments:

Probably the biggest thing for me is ... I find because I've got an illness, that I get tired by the middle of semester, and then it's difficult getting through the second half when a lot of the work load's there. ... I take pretty heavy pain killers, which leaves me permanently tired.

Enduring an illness of a pathological nature is less common a burden than coping with the break-down of health often brought about by the stresses outlined above. Sleep problems may be one of these potentially damaging challenges.

I'm doing like an average of four hours sleep every night, to be quite frank, and its gotten to a point where I've actually seen the doctor this semester. I mean it might be a long-term thing, having been for like the last two or three years, but I'm finding it to be a more serious problem the further I get into University.

Not eating well was another commonly mentioned stress for younger students. Being older members of a family, or living out of home for the first time, means that students are responsible for producing their own meals—often a time consuming task. Additionally, working for many hours in a paid job as well as studying, means that food was frequently of the fast variety. The following is part of an exchange between a number of younger students, and gives many clues about the challenges simply getting fed can pose.

When you don't live with your family though there are different pressures. Like, I have to cook all my own dinners. I have to do all my own washing. I have to do all my own shopping and that takes up heaps of time. Like, it's an hour every night to cook dinner and clean up if I don't get take-out.

It's so much easier just to get take-out.

And the money you spend as well.

Yeah.

I find that food is like all my money.

It's a big expense.

Because I'm always out, I would eat junk food every second day without fail and I hate it because it's bad for you, simple as that.

You're on the go though, you can't help it.

Yeah. When I'm at work, because I work over at Fountain Gate shops, you've got a half hour lunch break and you have to go during the middle of the day when it's the busiest. You run over to Maccas because it's literally the quickest thing.

And it's cheap.

Yeah, I swear those junk food people at Fountain Gate know me by name.

The usual?

Subway's like double the price or whatever and double the waiting times. By the time it takes you five minutes to walk there and another five minutes back and five to ten minutes in line, you can't be bothered. You actually want to sit down and eat your meal in the back room so you just go and get the quickest thing you can get and it's usually the unhealthiest thing you can get too.

This exchange reveals a number of complex challenges for students with multiple responsibilities around eating well, and fuelling their bodies to face the dual demands of paid work and study. Another of these challenges is the cost of commercially prepared food. One group of students revealed that they all experienced a sense of shame about not being able to afford to go with their non-student friends to eat, or drink: alcohol was potentially another major expense for the socially active student wanting to fit in with peers. Alongside the anxiety expressed about the cost of food, was another concerning the time spent *not* studying while they were socialising with friends, as this exchange of views reveals:

That's another thing I find, you don't want to look poor even though you are.

And if you're staying up the night before finishing off those essays, you get up at like the closest time possible for you just to have a chance to get ready and then look half decent to go to uni, and ... ever since I've been at uni I have not made myself lunch. You know, you just don't have the time in the morning and because you're at uni now, I know, and my mum will be gone by the time I'm going to uni, she doesn't make me anything anymore. I live off Tiny Teddies. That's what I'll have during the day unless you have to pay for it sort of thing because you don't have time in the morning to make yourself lunch.

(When going out with friends to eat) I do (enjoy it) when I'm sitting there, (but thinking) I really should be studying. I shouldn't be here. (Then) I might as well enjoy it – and (then) go “Crap, I've wasted two hours eating.” Where can I make up the time somewhere, like ... you have to say well, I have to restructure my whole plans for the next (day) and go, Ok, I've lost some time here. I can make it up if I don't sleep an hour.

Again, the issue of trade-offs arises. What parts of a normal life must be sacrificed by students so that the demands of education and career goals can be met? These students are potentially compromising their health and relationships—both of which are important, even essential aspects of maintaining a well balanced life—to meet all their competing responsibilities. Eating well, sleeping well and socialising with friends, are arguably things all these students value, but are being sacrificed on several levels as the flexibility between their circumstances and the demands of university is reduced. As McInnes & Hartley (2002) note, “Young adult lives are now conceived as more complex and less certain than in the recent past. The demands of often highly ‘flexible’ workplaces and somewhat less flexible educational institutions have to be balanced” (p.4). However, there are several strategies students have found to work for them in meeting these various challenges. These students' capacities to reflect on their own patterns of study, and their abilities to manage complex demands, are encouraging.

Coping strategies

...I think (early on in the degree) you have to sacrifice a lot of personal time ... to be able to cope with everything and that in itself is a bit overwhelming. ... (Now, later into the degree) ...if I do things I like and I'm with friends, those are activities that give me the energy to do whatever I need to do. When I found I didn't have the time to do those (energy boosting) activities, I spent a lot of energy on what I had to do without getting that boost back, so I found it wasn't sustainable.

One feature common to most of the focus groups was awareness among the students that University life is meant to be demanding. If it was a walk in the park everyone would be doing a degree. The stresses and anxieties were not unexpected: just tedious features of an increasingly familiar landscape. It is difficult to measure how stresses impact on essay or exam results. Evaluation becomes even more complex when stress is identified as a major motivating force keeping students engaged and alert. The motivation stress provides is identified in the following quotes, and fits well into the mode of student engagement identified by Jardine and Krause as ‘persistence’, which they define as “the individual student's actions to continue with studies despite negative influences acting upon them” (Jardine & Krause, 2005, p.5). As the stresses rise coming into the second half of semester, the realisation dawns that action needs to be taken to fulfil the subject requirements. Several students identified this ‘stress kick-in’ as a useful force for getting motivated, and in one group the question arose as to how this might work in practice, and whether there was an expectation in having stress work in their favour.

Like I mean I think it's a good stress. Without that stress I really don't think I'd be able to do my work. Like I'd just sit there and I'd go, oh yeah, like he said, I've got like four weeks. I'll just leave that and do other things first, but it's a good stress. Like when I stop getting stressed about not being stressed, okay, that's like a pre-emptive side and you'd better start doing something now, but I don't particularly enjoy stress, but I think it's a good kind of stress to get you kicking in and going.

Other students found the stress a motivating force, but did not see it as a positive thing for them. Rather, it highlighted their need to reassess their approaches to study, and perhaps take more responsibility for acquiring time-management skills.

No, actually I do want to try and organise myself where I'm not feeling stressed all the time. I don't like being stressed. I like being calm and just sort of relaxed and I've been trying to work it around that way, but I don't know; it doesn't work. I think I need more time. I need more time management skills.

Q: And more time in the day?

And I need to adhere to my time management programs.

Yeah, I think that's the hard bit. It's all very easy to set up and say, okay, well, I'll manage it. It's this, this, this and plan it out, but it invariably doesn't go the way you plan it.

To persist with study through all the difficulties that arise in an academic year—expected and unexpected — is an achievement in itself. Many students undertaking their second or third year mentioned the pressures changing as they became more familiar with university life; with the expectations of teaching staff, and with their own strengths and weaknesses in managing their various loads.

Such changes included finding the resources and motivation to aim for higher results, as well as being able to form a clearer idea of the activities (such as exercising and eating and sleeping well) and patterns (of time management, planning and preparation) which best support them. These things then constitute a basic structure of support to withstand, hopefully, the pressures of unexpected events. Keeping healthy through sport and other physical activity was identified as central to this maintenance, as this series of responses demonstrates.

Q: Do you find doing a sport helps you concentrate?

I hate to brag but I'm the best person in my division purely because I get out that anger out from my work – when you beat your opponents – I strongly encourage everyone to get into a sport.

My friend, she works full time and she has dogs and because they are big dogs she has to walk them in the morning before she goes to work, and she says just doing that she is awake, alert; it gives her a better mood and everything.

It is just a natural high you know.

There is that pain factor when you're pushing yourself to do really well and then, (when I've put in a big effort) I don't have to do anything, now I can lay on the couch and not feel guilty. (But it can also be bad): I don't have to do the essay because I did a run today.

I wrote a thousand words and have a chocolate biscuit.

Q: *A reward?*

I call them study tools.

These students see their study demands in the light of a challenge; like a competitive task. Putting in your best effort is something that needs rewarding. They self-reward, and have a sense of humour about the trade-offs. In many of the focus groups there was an atmosphere of relief and humour combined as it became clear the issues of struggling with study, work and self-esteem were widely shared. A sense of collegiality appears to help students feel less isolated in their 'persistence'; in realising that their peers find the juggling act of studying, working and living equally difficult, as these students from the one of the smaller campuses found:

One of the things I really like actually and we were doing it up there before, just before I came down, is just sitting down as a group with the other students ... and just talking about how things are going, so just sounding out what's happening socially, what's happening in terms of work, what's everyone struggling with, just sitting down and chatting about it, not a set study group as such.

Yeah, and (you) realise you're not alone, that's right. We're all going through similar experiences.

Students from one of the smaller campuses in particular were vocal in their appreciation of being able to access a social network of fellow students on a regular basis, but without a formal structure. Having set meeting times for such interactions would not meet the need for collegiality in the same way. Instead, it could represent yet another demand eating into study time. The more intimate dimensions of the smaller campus enabled this kind of interaction to develop naturally—something the larger campuses could not easily replicate. A number of students at Berwick also referred to the imposing dimensions of the Clayton and Caulfield campuses, reflecting that their home campus had a more human scale, well suited to impromptu discussion among people who share common experiences.

Another strategy offered to meet the dual need for saving time and keeping support systems active was to combine activities; to relax and nurture your self while socialising with a friend. This strategy came from a more mature student in a later year of study:

It's a bit mad. But for me, like you were saying about social things, I find it difficult to say no and I think I've only recently learnt to say no. But I have a balance so, going to a friend's house tonight who is a beauty therapist, who is going to do facial. Every ten weeks I've decided to book it in, because we can never catch up any other way. So she'll do a facial and chat the whole time. So cool I've found some time for me and some friend time. So I'm just going to plug it in every ten weeks.

Overall, it appears that the further students get into their studies, the more confidence they develop in working out how to manage competing demands. This is an interesting finding in light of a perceived lack of research into students' well-being beyond the first year (Cooke et al, 2006, p.515). The findings in this research correspond closely to the findings made by Clegg et al (2006), that students "appear to preserve their esteem by using informal supports and by digging deep into the self and their own sense of personal project in coming to university" (p.102). Relaxation, exercise, socialising and eating well are not expendable activities, and in fact assist students to succeed in managing stress. That later-year students have come to realise this is encouraging.

Conclusion

Undergraduate students are spending increasingly long hours in paid work. They are finding it a challenge to maintain important family and social support systems, and struggling at times to care for their own health and well-being. Working to pay for materials, books, petrol and food is increasingly necessary, and inability to manage these demands can cause stress. As a result, study times are often restricted to after-hours and weekends. Family responsibilities to parents, spouses and children must be met alongside completing readings and assessment tasks, and failure to respond often leads to guilt. Caring for their health with exercise, sufficient sleep, healthy food and social interaction is a constant challenge for these students.

Despite these demands, which are significant issues deserving attention, the students interviewed were generally managing to fulfil their study obligations successfully. They were aware prior to entering university, or quickly became aware upon commencing their studies, that success means many trade-offs and personal sacrifices must be made. However, they realise they are not alone in these challenges, and often seek out peer-support and encouragement in order to minimise their stress.

The younger students in particular displayed good humour and their expectations—of themselves and of their lecturers—were realistically grounded. Additionally, students further in to their study programs appear to have developed more effective coping strategies and a more realistic approach to balancing multiple roles and responsibilities.

Nevertheless, sacrifices and trade-offs such as those documented here often result in added pressure coming to bear on how students manage study and approach assessment tasks.

Areas for further research to build on these findings would include a comparative study between first year and later year cohorts, and possibly even a longitudinal study to assess the kinds of issues which both enhance or restrict the development of effective coping strategies over the course of a study program. The findings made here would be broadly applicable to other major urban-centred Australian universities. Further research in other settings is needed to add to the knowledge gained here before generalisations could be made about issues of student health, self esteem and well-being.

The work of managing stress should not be all up to the students. Educators and students need to work together in order to accommodate evolving and changing extra-curricular demands when designing and completing units. Additionally, faculty administrations need to continue to incorporate flexible communication into institutional arrangements; to more effectively inform students about expectations, and to facilitate more responsive administrative support.

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