

The First Year Experience in Second Year: Pathway College versus University Direct Entry

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Abstract

There are a growing number of international and local students entering university programs in the second year of the degree program after transitioning through a pathway provider. In Australia the term “pathway provider” is used to refer to partnerships between universities and (generally) private, for-profit higher education colleges providing Diploma programs as a “pathway” for students to enter the second year of a university program. There is no one clear definition for the term “pathway provider”, the naming convention is unclear and there is no one agreed upon term for these institutions. There is, however, significant data on the growth of this industry and its benefits to the economy, its enhancement of cultural diversity on university campuses, the potential for internationalisation of the curriculum and a welcome addition to university revenue. It is estimated that 60% of international students in higher education have come from some form of pathway provider. While research has examined the first year experience of University students in some depth, differences between the experiences of a pathway students to direct entry first year university students requires further investigation. The purpose of this investigation is to determine the extent of difference between students completing the first year of their degree program at a pathway provider compared to direct entry at a University and the subsequent impact on the pathway student’s results at the second year level.

Keywords

Pathway provider, second year, student experience, pass rates

Introduction

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2011) states that In 2009, over one in five (22%) tertiary students studying in Australia were international students. Whilst there has been a drop in student visa applications since 2009, international students are still seen as an important addition to the Australian economy and education services as a group are Australia’s largest service export industry, with onshore activity contributing \$16.3 billion to the Australian economy in 2010–11. It is anticipated that this will grow to \$19.1 billion and 520,000 students by 2020 (AEI 2013).

A high proportion of international students enter university via pathway colleges and lately a growing proportion of domestic students. The growth of pathway colleges has been exponential in recent years. It is estimated that there are 36 partnerships in the UK, 13 in the US and 11 in Australia which service multiple universities (Baker 2011). Australian Education International (AEI 2012) found that 60 per cent of international students in higher education in 2011 had studied in another sector previously, either a pathway college including VET, a higher education pathway college or an ELICOS centre. It is more complex to find data on the number of domestic students that transition from other sectors to higher education. Gurthrie, Stanwick and Karmel in a 2010 survey identified 34,600 VET graduates went on to enrol in higher education programs (Guthrie 2011).

The literature indicates that there are large numbers of student cohorts enrolled in private provider “for profit” pathway colleges. For example, Navitas a pathway provider based in Australia, had over 21,000 international and domestic students enrolled in its University Programs Division in 2011, 80% of whom are enrolled in a pathway program and with a suggested average 90% transition rate into second year courses at partner universities (Baker 2011). Study Group, another global pathway provider with 28 International Study Centres in 6 countries including Australia, also claims a 90% transition rate into its university partners programs (SGA 2013).

Pathway Colleges are a fast growing industry sector in Australia, the UK and the US. Primarily catering to international students, there are a growing number of local students opting to study with a pathway college, prior to entering university courses at their partner institution.

There is no clear definition for the term “pathway college”, the naming convention is unclear and there is no agreed upon term for these colleges. In Australia the term “pathway college” is used to refer to partnerships between universities and (generally) private, for-profit higher education colleges providing Diploma programs as a “pathway” for students to enter second year of a university program (Fiocco 2006). This also extends to pathway programs that exist between public institutions including TAFEs, Institutes of Technology, Polytechnics and university programs. These programs, both state and private sector, are primarily for students who have not met the eligibility criteria to obtain direct entry to university. This could be either English language proficiency or academic entry requirements.

In the UK the term more commonly used is “partner college” and is often a collaborative arrangement with Further Education Colleges in the state sector (Baker 2011). Private partner relationships are referred to as “feeder college” arrangements such as those between Study Group and Strathclyde University in Scotland (News 2013). Whereas in the US “feeder colleges” generally refer to two year community colleges that “feed into” high level post-graduate four year degree universities (Lederman 2012; Explorer 2013). Although private pathway providers such as Study Group have developed relationships with universities in both the US and UK and they mirror the pathway model that is well known and established in the Australian higher education sector.

For the purposes of this paper “pathway colleges” are defined as colleges that are located on a university partner campus and have contractual arrangements for articulation of Diploma students into second year of the partner university degree program.

There has been some discussion on the purpose of pathway colleges and Fiocco and Dunworth (Fiocco 2006; Dunworth 2012) suggest that the primary purpose of pathway colleges is to increase international student recruitment for the university partner. This is no longer the only rationale for a university partnering with a private provider. Improving recruitment of international students is certainly one aspect of university policy, which also increases university revenue and is an important

aspect in an economy of Government funding cuts to the tertiary sector. For example, Australia is facing a funding cut of \$A2.3 billion from the tertiary education sector in 2013-14 (Matchett 2013).

Other aspects of pathway college and university partnerships also serve to meet the commitment from many universities to increase student participation more broadly. In this sense pathway colleges are ideally positioned as “second chance” institutions.

Importantly, such second chance institutions must ensure rigor in the preparation of their students to ensure that they are well prepared for second year study at the partner university. Rahul Choudaha, Director of Research and Advisory Services at World Education Services states that:

How do you ensure that while you provide opportunity and a second chance to students, it does not lead to an overlooking of minimum standards set by the university? (Redden 2013)

That is the key point in examining the outcomes of students in both their pathway programs and subsequent studies at the university level.

The reported transition rates of pathway students into second year degree programs appear high indicating that the partnerships are of value to the university partner (Baker 2011; SGA 2013). However, there is a lack of literature on the comparative outcomes of pathway students in Diplomas and first year direct entry degree students on campus and in further stages of their degree program.

Much of the current research on pathway colleges focuses on English language proficiency and the student experience, (Fiocco 2006; Dunworth 2012; Maros 2012; Mendan 2012; Pearce 2012) and very little has been written on the outcomes of students in pathway colleges.

Fiocco (2006) found that there was little difference between the outcomes of Diploma students and direct entry students in the second year of their program. She indicates that the Semester Weighted Average (SWA) of both cohorts was statistically insignificant with pathway students in the Bachelor of Commerce at the partner university obtaining an SWA of 56.69 and direct entry students 57.91.

Fiocco also examined pass rates and retention rates of the two cohorts and found that pathway students had comparable pass rates in second year at 78.4% and direct entry 79.1% (international) and 82.8% (domestic). Fiocco also found that in terms of retention rates it appears that pathway students had similar retention rates as direct entry international students and higher than direct entry domestic students.

The findings indicate that pathway students achieve comparable grades and pass rates as direct entry students. However, the data only examined two semesters of study in two different years. To obtain

more in depth results, a longer timeframe will be examined to determine if the findings are statistically relevant. This paper seeks to determine whether pathway students obtain comparable grades and retention rates throughout their degree program and will examine the data over a three year period. The results can then be utilised to identify initiatives to improve student outcomes.

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Research Purpose

While research has examined the first year experience of University students in some depth, differences between the experiences of pathway students to direct entry first year university students requires further investigation. The purpose of this investigation is to determine the extent of difference between students entering second year of the degree program after completing the equivalent of first year as a Diploma at a pathway provider compared to direct entry students at a University.

As Bob Gilmour, Director of Academic Programs for Oregon State points out:

The key thing for us is that the ex-pathway students are performing at the same level as the direct... if not slightly better. That's interesting when on paper they didn't qualify for direct entry in the first place. (Redden 2013)

Pathway Colleges provide students with intense support including additional teaching hours; small class sizes; optional extra tutorials and English language support (Navitas 2013; SGA 2013). Students are nurtured and supported in order to achieve the results required to enter second year of the partner university.

At this point pathway students face their genuine “first year experience” as second year students. Generally, universities offer orientation and transition programs for direct entry first year students and there is an expectation that second year students have adapted to university life. For pathway students second year may be the first time they have encountered large lecture environments and university policies on how to request an extension for an assessment, how to defer an exam and how to qualify for a supplementary assessment.

There is scant research on this type of student experience and research that does consider the “second year” experience is mainly from the US and focuses on the unique requirements of second year (or sophomore) students (Kawczynski 2009; Heier 2012). The majority of the US research looks at retention rates and student engagement at second year as it was found that some sophomore students “experience feelings of abandonment during the second year as the support initiatives start to disappear” (Hunter, Tobolowsky, Gardner, Evenbeck, Pattengale, Shcaller & Schreinder cited in (Heier 2012).

Anecdotal evidence from ex pathway students indicates that many pathway students also experience feelings of “abandonment” when moving from the smaller, more nurturing pathway college to the larger, more impersonal university environment. This is particularly relevant given that most

universities do not offer transition programs to pathway entry students in second year. This phenomenon is interesting given that for some universities more than 50% of their students enter from pathway or articulation partners in second and sometimes third year of the degree program.

This lack of orientation and transition for students from pathway colleges could impact negatively on their pass rates and retention rates in second year as they take time to adjust to a new and more complex environment. Given that these students start their studies from a lower academic or English (or both) start point, the ability to succeed at second and third years is critical for these students and universities will need to consider implementing either transition programs or orientation programs for these students entering second year.

Research question

The research question this study attempts to address is:

Do students entering the second year of a degree program from a pathway college achieve the same pass rates and retention rates as students entering from first year of a degree program?

The data analysed in this research in support of the main research question are:

- a. Compare course pass rates over three years from 2010-2012;
- b. Compare retention rates per over three years from 2010-2012.

In order to answer the research question data will be collected and compared with second year direct entry university students and Diploma students from the pathway provider.

Method

In an attempt to answer the research question, the statistical research method used will be analysis of variance (ANOVA). The data from the two cohorts (university student cohort international and domestic and pathway college student cohort) will be analysed by using one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and the associated F ratio and P value across both groups of data (Kleinbaum 1998). One-way ANOVA is considered to be the most appropriate tool for analysing the summative differences in pass rates and retention rates of the two cohorts of students.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Table 1 shows second year university domestic and international course pass rates for second year students compared with pass rates of second year students from a pathway college 2010-2012.

	Domestic	International	Ex Pathway College
2010 s1	0.82	0.81	0.76
2010 s2	0.83	0.82	0.76
2011 s1	0.82	0.82	0.85
2011 s2	0.84	0.84	0.73
2012 s1	0.83	0.79	0.78
2012 s2	0.84	0.8	0.73

Table 1: Pass rate percentages

Figure 1 below is a graphical representation of the data.

Course Pass Rates

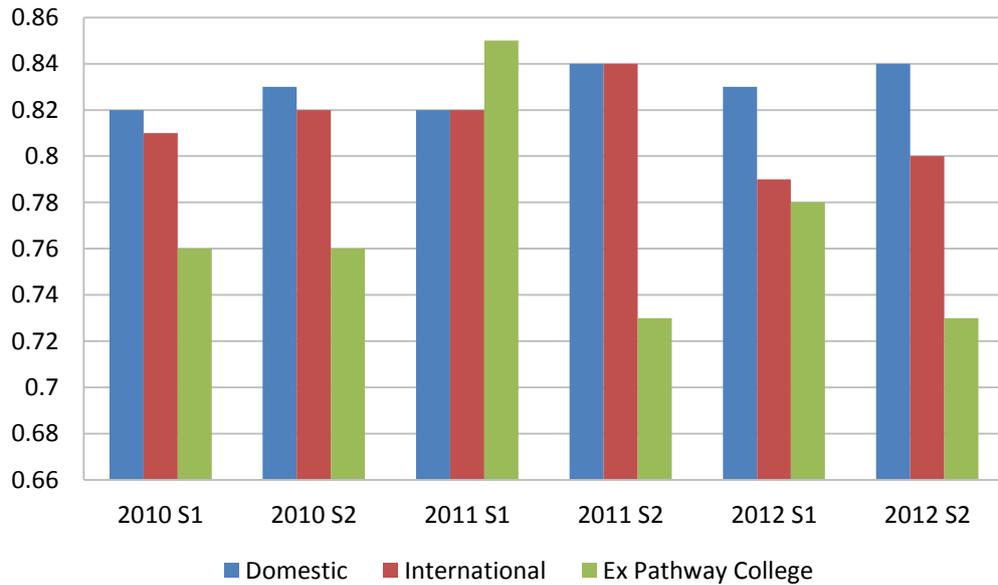


Figure 1: Course pass rates graph

The course pass rates for 2010, 2011 and 2012 (semesters 1 and 2) are represented in Figure 1 above. The graph shows that Ex Pathway College students have lower pass rates (excluding semester one 2011). The difference between the types of students needs to be confirmed with statistical analysis. This can be done using analysis of variance (ANOVA). The hypotheses for this test follow:

$$H_0: \mu_1 = \mu_2 = \mu_3$$

H_a : At least one of the means is different from the others

The ANOVA test (see table 2 below) shows that F observed is 7.75. The critical value is the number that the test statistic must exceed to reject the test. In this case, $F_{(crit)}$ is 6.36 at $\alpha=0.01$. Since $F > F_{(crit)}$, the results are significant at the 99% significance level. Therefore, we can reject the null hypothesis, concluding that there is a significant difference between the three groups. The p-value for this test is 0.0049.

Anova: Single Factor

SUMMARY

Groups	Count	Sum	Average	Variance
Domestic	6	4.98	0.83	8E-05
International	6	4.88	0.813333	0.000307
Ex Pathway College	6	4.61	0.768333	0.001977

ANOVA

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	F crit
Between Groups	0.012211	2	0.006106	7.750353	0.004879	3.68232
Within Groups	0.011817	15	0.000788			

Table 2: Anova pass rate data

Table 3 below shows the second year university domestic and international retention rates for second year students compared with retention rates of second year students from a pathway college 2010-2012.

	Domestic	International	Ex Pathway College
2010 s1	0.86	0.84	0.96
2010 s2	0.89	0.96	0.94
2011 s1	0.85	0.96	0.82
2011 s2	0.9	0.95	0.94
2012 s1	0.84	0.97	0.8
2012 s2	0.87	0.97	0.83

Table 3: Retention percentages

Figure 2 below is a graphical representation of the retention data:

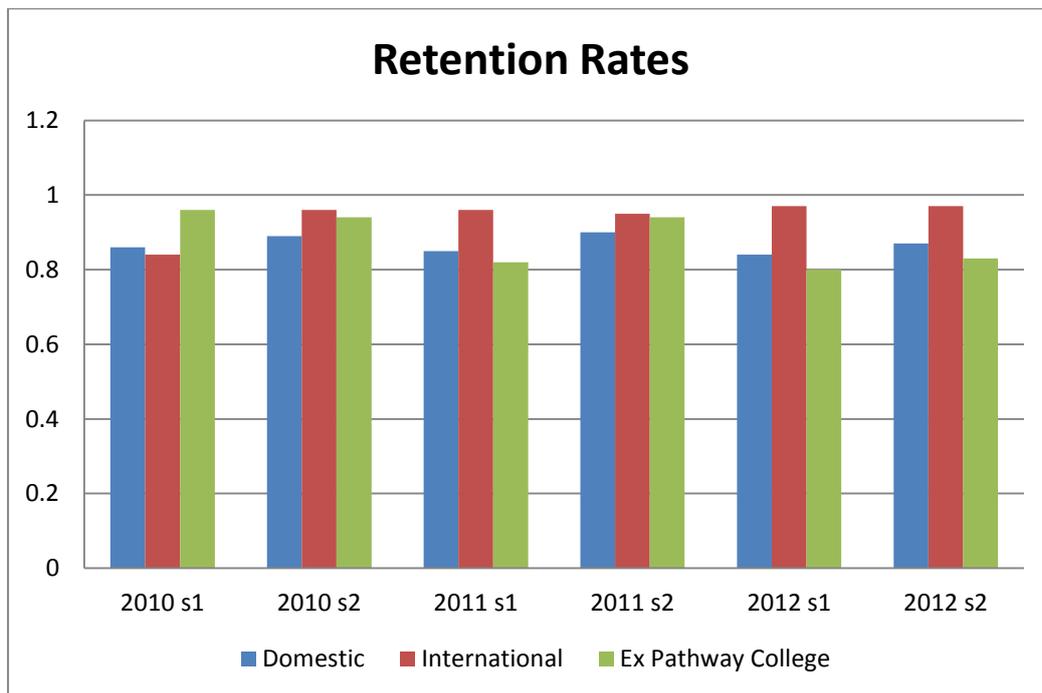


Figure 2: Retention rate graph

The retention rates for 2010, 2011 and 2012 (semesters 1 and 2) are represented in Figure 2 above. The graph shows that Ex Pathway College students have lower retention rates. The difference between the types of students needs to be confirmed with statistical analysis. This can be done using analysis of variance (ANOVA). The hypotheses for this test follow:

$$H_0: \mu_1 = \mu_2 = \mu_3$$

H_a: At least one of the means is different from the others

The ANOVA test (see table 4 below) shows that F observed is 3.31. The critical value is the number that the test statistic must exceed to reject the test. In this case, F_(crit) is 2.70 at α=0.1. Since F > F_(crit), the results are significant at the 90% significance level. Therefore, we can reject the null hypothesis, concluding that there is a significant difference between the three groups. The p-value for this test is 0.064.

Anova: Single Factor

SUMMARY

<i>Groups</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>Sum</i>	<i>Average</i>	<i>Variance</i>
Domestic	6	5.21	0.868333	0.000536667
International Ex Pathway	6	5.65	0.941667	0.002536667
College	6	5.29	0.881667	0.005216667

ANOVA

<i>Source of Variation</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>
Between Groups	0.018311	2	0.009156	3.31322879
Within Groups	0.04145	15	0.002763	
Total	0.059761	17		

Table 4: Anova Retention data

Conclusion and further research

Pathway providers are valuable partnerships for the university sector and it would be beneficial to conduct further research into this phenomenon in order to develop strategies strengthen student pass rates and improve the student experience. It is evident from the data that students from pathway colleges do not achieve similar pass rates or retention rates to their direct entry counterparts. There may be a number of reasons for the difference including that pathway students initially start their studies at a lower academic, English or both academic and English level. However, the pathway college has prepared the students and considers them to be on par with direct entry students once both cohorts reach second year level. It may be that pathway students take longer to acclimatise to the university environment and receive little support as second year students.

Further research is required whereby the author will examine data including Course Weighted Averages across second and third year. To achieve more nuanced data it is anticipated that focus groups of ex pathway students will be conducted to ascertain whether the “second year as first year” phenomenon is a problem for pathway students and to identify possible transition programs that may improve pass rates and retention rates for this cohort of students.

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