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Enabling connections and persistence in a distributed learning community

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Introduction

Concerns about rates of retention and attrition in Higher Education, and the appropriateness of the linguistic terminology used to discuss the phenomenon, date back almost a century. For example, in the nineteen sixties in the United States a Harvard Educational review article reflected on forty years of research and the lack of evidence that attrition rates had risen since the nineteen twenties, disputing the 40-60 % estimates found in much of the contemporary research (Eckland, 1964). Eckland concluded that, in any case, 'most drop-outs came back' (p.405). Relative to the wealth of published research literature pertaining to undergraduate retention and attrition since the time of Professor Eckland, there has been relatively little publication of evidence based research on retention related specifically to enabling programs. This study seeks to address this imbalance even if in a very small way and continues previous work on the topic by Tas Bedford, (Bedford, 2009) whose research on student retention on the Tertiary Preparation Program (TPP) was presented at previous Enabling conferences. Information presented here is from a wider study investigating the student experience of factors that influence completion of study on TPP, a distance education course leading to undergraduate entry offered by the University of Southern Queensland (USQ). Discussion will begin with a short description of methodology adopted and go on to discuss constraints to study. The strategies used by participants to manage constraints will also be outlined, along with discussion of the nature of the competencies that underpin resilience and persistence with study in an enabling program.

Methodology

A mixed methods approach to data collection and analysis was adopted in which the researcher bases knowledge claims on pragmatic grounds .The first phase of analysis interpreted data collected by a survey constructed to elicit background characteristics and student expectations related to TPP study. The data was collated and analysed to construct an overall student profile of TPP and provide a sampling framework for the qualitative phases of the research. Qualitative data was generated from analysis of student assignments and interviews with consenting participants. Responses to assignment questions are assumed to reflect student experience of studying on TPP at various points of course progression. Exit interviews were conducted with participants who were classified as completers or non-completers. The criteria adopted for course completion was number of assignments submitted. There are eleven assignment items in TPP 7120 including the exam, and participants who submitted at least ten were classified as completers. Interview questions were designed to generate a phenomenological account of the experience of participants. One of the research objectives is to provide insight into the nature of strategies adopted by TPP

students to overcome perceived constraints to study. It is assumed that the constraints described by students influence decisions to persist with study. Due to ethical considerations, pseudonyms have been used in collation and presentation of data to ensure anonymity of participants.

Constraints

Unrealistic Expectations

Very few commencing TPP students have experience of formal education beyond secondary level schooling and therefore it is hardly surprising that many have little knowledge of how to prepare or plan for a period of intensive study at tertiary level. Many students fail to realise the impact tertiary study will have on their lives and failure to prepare family and significant others for change can add to difficulties associated with the types of cultural and linguistic shift necessary for successful study at tertiary level. For example, data in Appendix 1 clearly show the majority of students begin TPP with a strong belief in their own capacity to meet assignment deadlines and study requirements. More than half of these students will not complete the course within the required time or they will seek an extension of study into the next semester. (Appendix 2) While high levels of confidence about study may be a long term asset there can be negative impacts on study progression if unrealistic levels of confidence reflect conceptual misunderstanding of what study involves, in particular, the level of personal responsibility students require for successful study at tertiary level compared with previous academic experience (Devlin, 2002).

“I now recognise that learning at university is totally different from high school learning style in terms of teaching and gathering information together, and also as a university student your obligations is to do independent learning at home” (Bill, week 6)

Common constraints

Demographic characteristics of TPP students appear very similar to those reported in the literature (Bunn, 2009) in relation to the enabling program at University of Newcastle and it is possible that the type of constraints to successful study are common across most enabling programs. Although different factors may be isolated for discussion purposes it is clear from data analysis that it is the interactive effect of a range of constraints that tends to impact on study outcomes.

Table 1 Types of constraint identified by TPP respondents (week 6)

Employment and Domestic	Employment alone	Domestic alone
21	10	18
Academic	Procrastination	Time-management
12	12	5
Health	Finance	
4	4	

Time constraints and working students

Twenty one responses indicated that time and effort required to meet employment and domestic commitments was a constraint on study. While employment commitments refer to time committed to paid work, domestic commitments refer to household chores and/or family role responsibilities such as provision of care for children or other family members. While some respondents indicated both employment and domestic commitments constrained study (21), others cited only employment (10), or only domestic (18).

I work fifty-five hours per week, both day and night shifts, which takes up the majority of time I have available for study. (Adam)

I am finding that trying to fit study, work, family and recreational commitments is not quite as straightforward as I thought it would be. (Nat)

Time management (5) and procrastination (12), were mentioned together more frequently than employment (10) as a constraint. While time management was used to refer to failure to make a realistic study schedule, procrastination was often mentioned in associated with lack of motivation or negative beliefs about self-efficacy leading to failure to implement study plans.

I believe that I will not do very well at any of the assignments nor do I fully comprehend them. So I continuously put it off and do things that more interest me, until mere days or hours before the due date. This, in turn, creates stress leading myself to an even stronger belief that I will not be able to do it. (Pat)

Lack of Motivation is the main constraint that I have encountered during my higher educational studies. As I am finding a large portion of my studies to be tedious and uninspiring, instead of working towards my goals and I am procrastinating and spending more time on leisure activities instead of working on my assignments. (Norman)

Finding time for study

The amount of time available for study varies and is impacted by a variety of interacting factors including personal priorities and situational constraints reportedly related to paid and unpaid work. Many TPP students are effectively full time workers on a full time course of study and therefore the capacity to self – regulate is crucial to persistence. Planning, monitoring and reflection on learning are important constituents of self-regulation of study (Zumbrunn, Tadlock, & Roberts, 2011) and are also important components of the TPP curriculum. Although TPP students demonstrate the capacity to make study plans, set goals and construct timetables in the academic context, many struggle to apply these skills in practice.

I have found that my baby has been my biggest obstacle. I find that I do my best to set aside time to study, which on paper is so very easy, it is still very hard with a one (1) year old to stay focused on the task(s) ahead.(Jane)

For many TPP students, finding quality study time requires renegotiation of social and familial roles. This can involve considerable adjustment to accepted social values and norms of behaviour, and also may require a great deal of negotiation and adjustment with family members and significant others. Although TPP students generally report expressions of support from family members at commencement of study, many do not appreciate the nature of the commitment and support can dissipate when the reality of the commitment sets in.

My friends and family have been a bit tough on me since I started studying as I have not had enough time to spend with them (Rita)

While the people around me have started to realise that studying is a big priority for me at the moment they continue to complain about the lack of time I have for them. (Barb)

Isolation

TPP is a distance education program with the opportunity for some participants to attend student 'meet-ups' and optional once-a week classes on campus. There are also online forums and discussion groups, an online Study Desk, helplines and telephone access to dedicated support personnel. Not all students appear willing or able to seek help, however, especially in dealing with the cognitive and emotional dissonance that can result from role conflict, or other social and cultural adjustments necessary to succeed as a tertiary student (Collier and Morgan, 2008). Unwillingness or inability to seek help can be more of a challenge than matching academic standards.

Archie, for example, was able to successfully complete 4 assignments but then withdrew because of 'time constraints'. He works forty hours a week driving a truck but was then "asked" to do overtime which he feels "was expected" as part of the job and was "non-negotiable". In addition he "feels guilty" about "reducing family time" although his wife fully supports his study ambitions. He withdrew because time constraints did not allow him enough time to "complete assignment to my own standards" even though he felt able "to pass".

This example illustrates how reported 'time constraints' may disguise the interactive nature of a variety of underlying constraints related to sociocultural norms and beliefs. In particular the reported feeling of 'guilt' associated with spending time studying was frequently reported by TPP students in this research and more widely in the literature (Stone, 2008). It is also significant that Archie did not communicate his difficulties or intentions to anyone in the teaching and learning community, and was therefore unable to access available support mechanisms or receive information about alternative study arrangements. Knowing when and how to ask for help, and from whom, is part of a set of sociocultural and linguistic competences necessary for successful transition to university study (Lawrence, 2005). Reluctance to seek help may reflect strong individualist self-reliant values that effectively act as a further constraint to persistence with study.

Overcoming constraints

Getting the family involved

Generally the most successful and commonly cited strategy for overcoming time constraints involved asking for help from family members or a significant other.

"The hardest part of the course was asking for help..... once I overcame my inhibitions I knew I could cope" (Debra). Debra reported constraints related to "an inability to focus on study" but was eventually able to manage her constraint with the assistance of her family and boyfriend who combined forces to prevent her from "procrastinating because of Facebook, the phone, needing a drink or something to eat" by confining her to her room "until the work was complete." This particular strategy to overcome procrastination would have been difficult for a tutor to enforce but was a commonly cited strategy to overcome a frequently reported constraint.

Many students reported difficulty finding quality time for study but managed to overcome this constraint by involving significant others and applying time management skills gained during TTPP study to real life situations.

I knew I had to adjust my life to succeed. I now treat study like my "other job". I study mostly during the day and leave the evenings to spend with my family. I rescheduled my personal training clients so I can work in set periods. I started getting up every morning at 5am and go to bed later which gives me more time. I make a daily list and prioritise activities. (Brooke)

Taking control

Occasionally single strategies were employed to counter a specific constraint but TPP students also report utilising a suite of strategies to maximise empowerment and self-regulation with respect to study and personal affairs. The following extract is from a single mother and full time worker with two children who utilised a range of strategies to overcome situational constraints to study which included a "*disruptive household*".

I have communicated with my employer and arranged flexible working hours around lectures and tutorials. After discussion with my children they have agreed to take on some extra jobs around the house so that I have more time available for study. My parents will take the children to and from school and sporting events. This will allow me sufficient quality time to study and make sure I utilise this time effectively (Liz)

Other strategies reported by this student demonstrate the utility of adopting an interdependent approach to study as well as the importance of connecting with other members of the learning community. Strategies included having a "*study buddy that kept me grounded*" and "*helped me understand maths while I helped her with English*"; how they were able to reflect on feedback and conclude that in assignments it is "*more important to give the answer expected than tell the truth*".

Connecting with the teaching and learning community

Overcoming the constraint of isolation is not easy on a distance education course but many persistent students tend to seize any opportunity to interact and learn from other members of the teaching and learning community.

Before I started the TPP course I thought I would be more alone and have to figure everything out on my own but I find I am doing well in my studies and I like going to 'meet up' sessions and taking the help from wherever I can get it . I went to a workshop yesterday, it was good because I was able to get a different perspective on how to write properly in the academic style (Cathy)

To help resolve the difficulty I have encountered with learning particular parts of this course, I have started using the online forums through the student helpdesk and am discussing with other students how they have interpreted different items and how they learnt different things. I have also started to contact the university lecturers more frequently as opposed to using it as a last resort. (Geoff)

Connecting with other learners was also a strategy reportedly used to combat difficulties associated with motivation and procrastination.

I have found a fellow student in the TPP that is having the same constraints as myself, we are now studying together and keeping each other motivated by supporting each other and collaborating ideas to help each other understand what is expected from us as students. (Jacqui)

Strategic withdrawal and extension to the study period

A number of TPP students are ‘repeaters’, some of whom appear to have interrupted study as a strategy to deal with perceived time constraints. This tends to occur when students find themselves behind with assignments and reason that it is more expedient to begin again with a different study approach than to attempt to ‘catch up’. For example, Margaret recalls her first attempt at TPP as ‘*stressful*’ but after a period of interrupted study re-enrolled, “*more motivated.....studied more hours.... and more committed to my long term goals of studying nursing*” because she “*understood exactly what to do*” and “*where to get help*” when she needed it. The majority of students who fail to complete the required number of assignments do not tend to formally withdraw from TPP, but many of those who were interviewed expressed an intention to re- enrol in TPP at a later date. This provides some support for the claim that the percentage of students ‘dropping out’ of (undergraduate) study completely, without intention to re-enrol at a later date, might be less than ten per cent (Long, Ferrier, & Heagney, 2006).

Application for extension to the period of study is another strategy used by some students who find that unforeseen changes to personal circumstances constrain their ability to comply with assessment deadlines. This was not a frequently used strategy by TPP participants (see Appendix 3) and many students claim to be unaware of the existence of this option. In other cases students are unable to apply for a time extension because applications must be submitted by week eight of the course and furthermore must be accompanied with a detailed schedule of when the applicant intends to submit future assignments. ‘Change of circumstances’ reported as impacting on decisions to interrupt study includes unexpected alteration of work schedules, loss or gain of employment, illness, and family crises.

...family issues, change of job with more hours, and medical problems related to depression..... Fell behind and couldn’t catch upfelt less motivated..... Couldn’t get assignments in on time so finished up not submitting them...

In this particular case the student did not apply for an extension. It is arguable that this student disengaged from TPP because he was unable to establish the necessary connections to the learning and teaching community or access necessary help and support. In particular there was no contact with TPP staff because he “*didn’t think of it at the time*” and in addition he “*didn’t know who to contact*”, underlining the importance of personalised learning (Simpson, 2008) to persistence and also the trend for students at tertiary institutions not to know the names of tutors (Krause, 2005); (James, Krause, & Jennings, 2010) .

By way of contrast, most of the interview respondents who applied for extensions reportedly chose this option on the advice of tutors following personal communication. Unfortunately the formal nature of procedures involved in submitting applications for extensions were sometimes described as adding stress to an already stressful situation. One student claims she was assigned a ‘fail’ grade and was urged to contest the decision by a former TPP student who “*knew how things worked*”. After communication with several different staff members an extension to the period of study was granted.

Overcoming the administrative constraints is more problematical than overcoming the academic ones”..... “I felt disheartened by the muck-up and felt disappointed

with some of the conversations”..... in which she claims she was “lectured about what she should have done to comply with USQ administrative procedures. (Linda)

It should be pointed out that this case was the exception rather than the rule and the overwhelming majority of interviewed respondents expressed strong approval of TPP provision, including academic and administrative support. This case has been included here because it provides an example of the importance of institutional habitus to the student experience. Institutional habitus determines university policy and practices and includes relational issues, priorities, specifications for courses and availability of flexible study options (Thomas, 2002). Institutional habitus should include flexible study arrangements as a matter of policy and promote a culture that prioritises meeting student needs over administrative compliance. Flexibility of study options increases the number of strategies available to students who find unforeseen changes to circumstances and the situational context of study make it difficult to comply with the standard TPP timetable. Less formal modes of communication might further increase the chances of students choosing one of the alternative options to disengagement from study.

The latter case study under consideration also provides an opportunity to highlight some of the themes identified in the earlier discussion of constraints and strategies. In particular, Linda was able to successfully negotiate with USQ, despite the obvious differences in power relations, largely because she had developed and was able to apply the necessary sociocultural and sociolinguistic skills required to contest authority in an academic context. In addition, she was able to draw on support from a fellow student, demonstrating the importance of relationships in accessing social and cultural capital, crucial to a sense of empowerment and self-regulation. In addition, she made personal contact with TPP personnel and, although she may not always have been satisfied with the nature of the interaction, it was this connection that finally produced an outcome that led to persistence with study rather than withdrawal.

Conclusions

It is clear that many TPP students have a diverse range of commitments and fulfil different roles in addition to that of full time student. A considerable number of the TPP student cohorts are full time workers and full time carers. Nevertheless, analysis of quantitative and qualitative data suggests completion of study is not determined by circumstances alone, and that includes number of hours spent in paid and unpaid employment in relation to the number of hours committed to study. Rather it is strongly influenced by individual interpretation and personal response to those circumstances. For example overcoming study constraints related to paid and unpaid work is mediated by the students' capacity to access and utilise social capital within the learning community. This capacity requires the development of a number of sociocultural and sociolinguistic competencies in addition to the normative competencies required to comply with institutional academic standards. Competencies related to communication and negotiation skills appear to be crucial in self-regulation of study. Finding time to study within a family context may depend as much on empowerment and contesting dominant cultural norms related to the family role as it does on time management. Learning what is expected in an assignment or the ability to code switch from a familiar to an academic variety of English ('academese') may depend on establishing friendships or connecting with the social forum just as much as attending a 'lecture'. Thus, learning how to study and knowing what is expected depends on building interpersonal relationships and establishing strategic connections within the learning community just as much as processing and reflecting on the content of the curriculum. Indeed compliance with institutional normative

standards may be conceived as the capacity to match sociocultural and sociolinguistic competencies in the academic context. In this case the role of the institution is not only to explicitly disseminate academic expectations and knowledge but also to ensure that individual learners have the capacity to meet these expectations by facilitating access and exploitation of the reservoir of social and academic capital resident in the teaching and learning community.

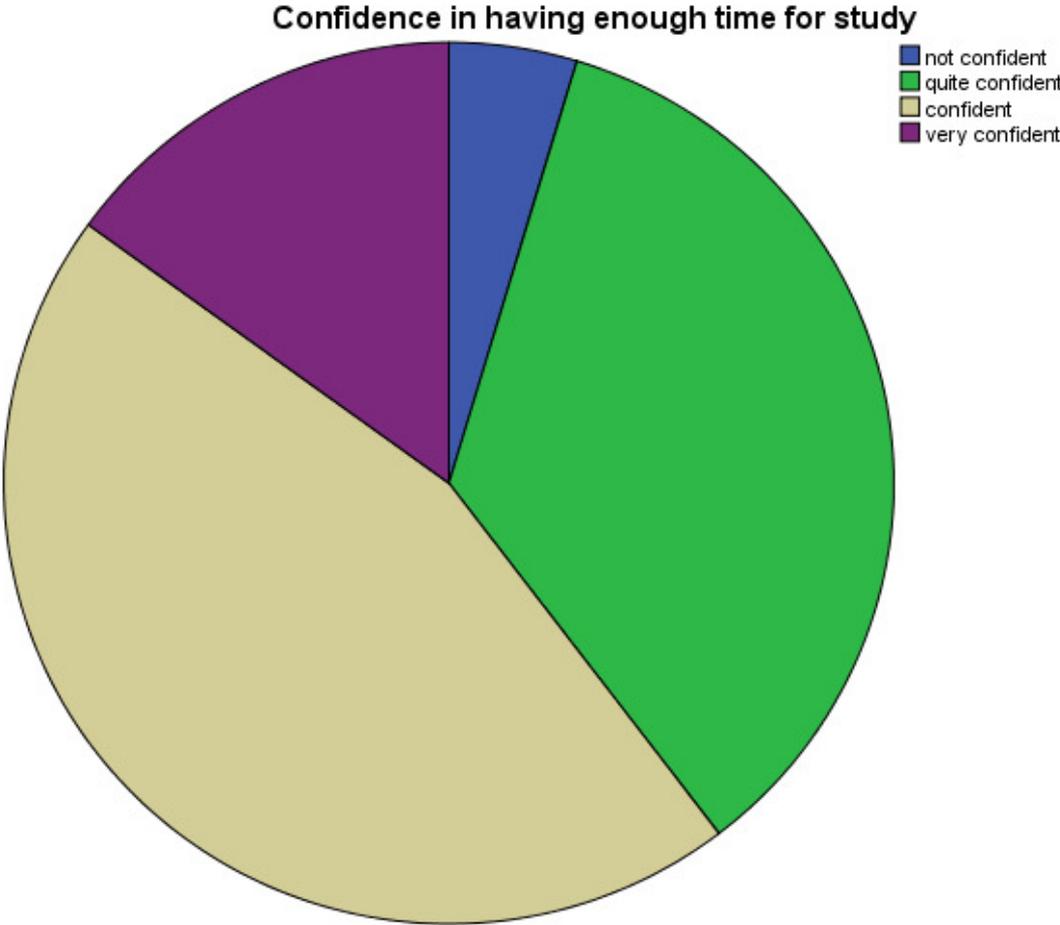
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Appendix 1: Commencing TPP students; levels of confidence

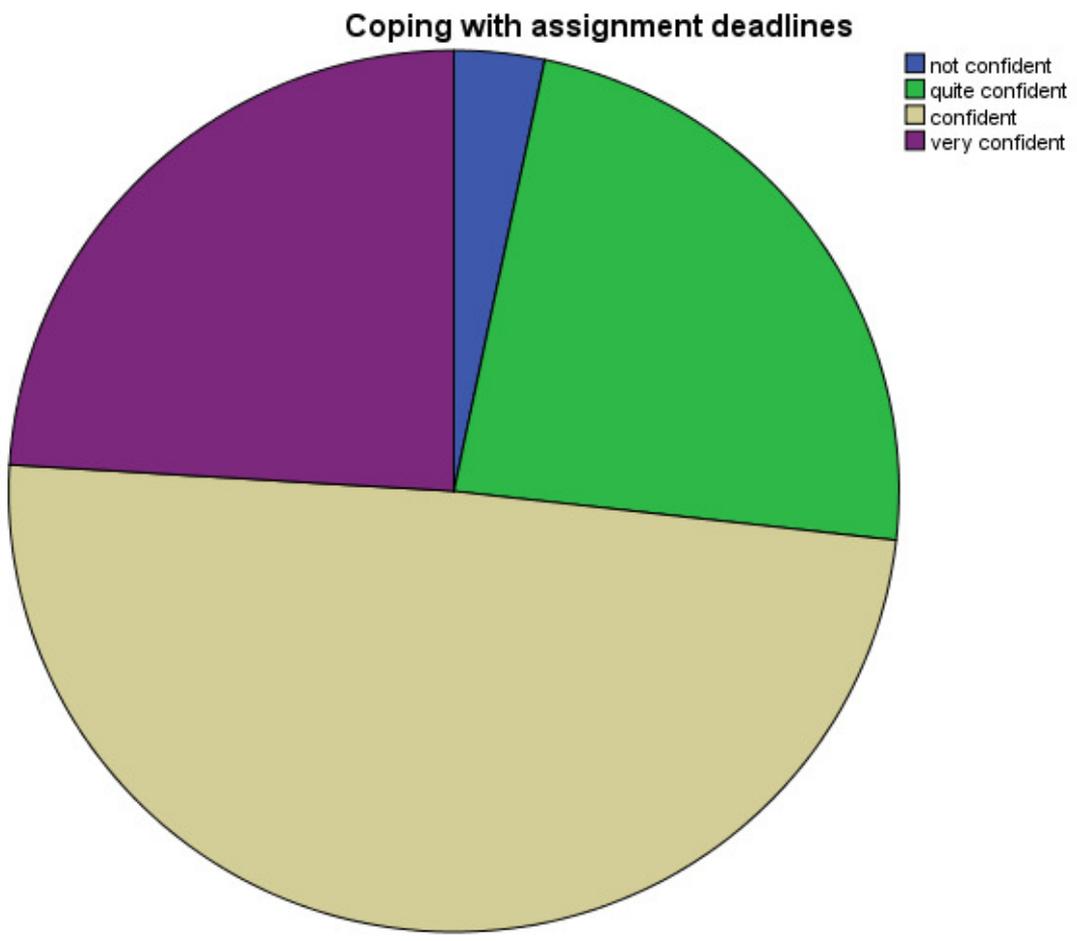
Confidence in having enough time for study

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
not confident	17	4.6	4.6	4.6
quite confident	128	35.0	35.0	39.6
Valid confident	166	45.4	45.4	85.0
very confident	55	15.0	15.0	100.0
Total	366	100.0	100.0	



Coping with assignment deadlines

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
not confident	12	3.3	3.3	3.3
quite confident	86	23.5	23.5	26.8
Valid confident	180	49.2	49.2	76.0
very confident	88	24.0	24.0	100.0
Total	366	100.0	100.0	

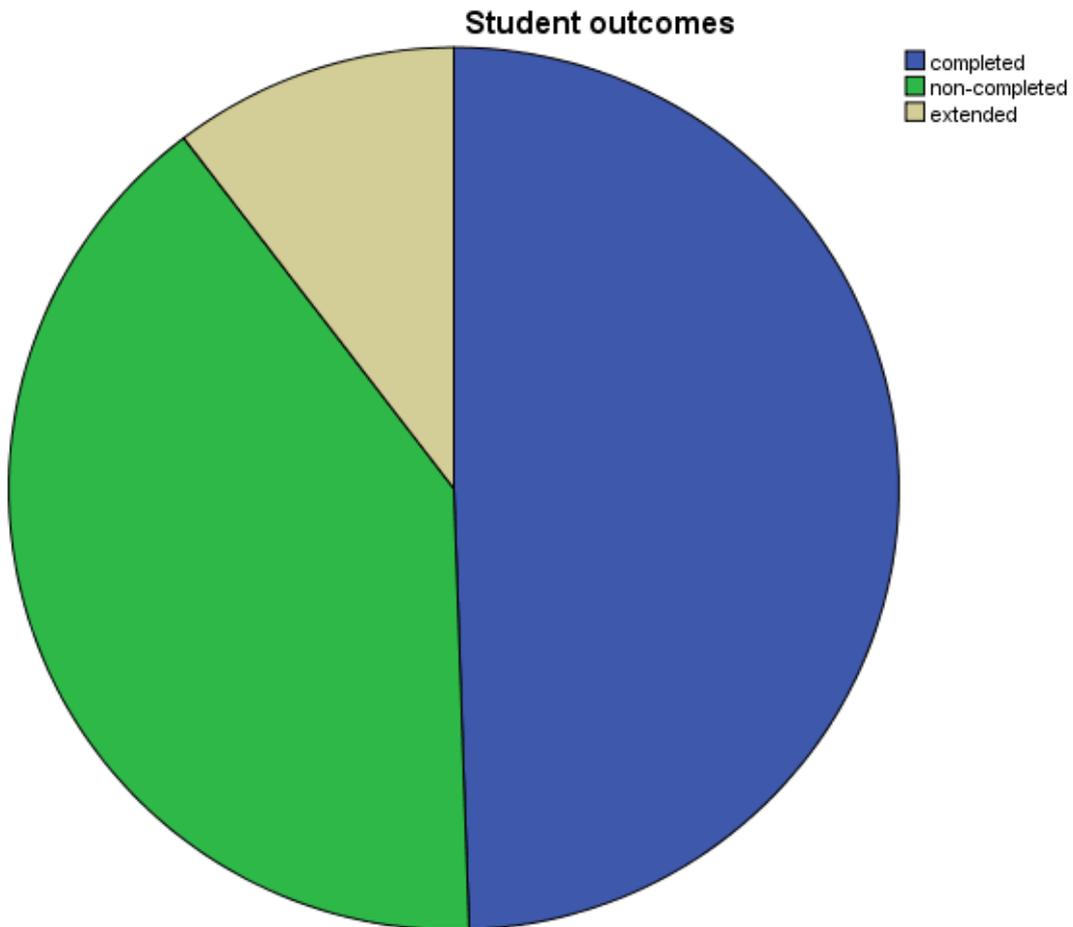


Appendix 2: Student Outcomes for TPP 7120

The highlighted areas refer to the proportion of students who extended study beyond the 2013 semester 1 period.

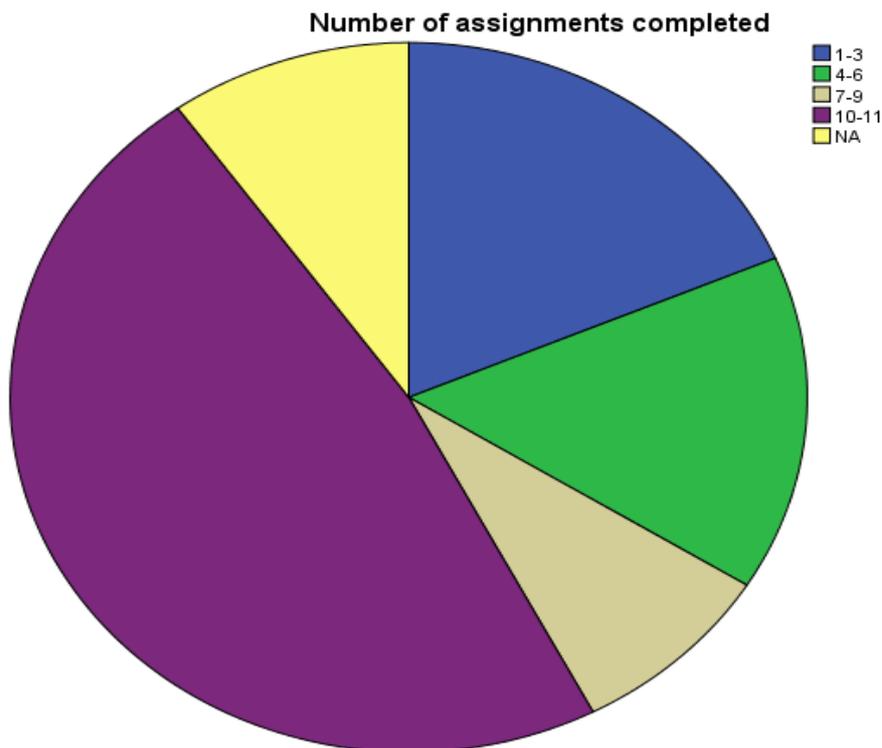
Student outcomes

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
completed	181	49.5	49.5	49.5
non-completed	147	40.2	40.2	89.6
Valid extended	38	10.4	10.4	100.0
Total	366	100.0	100.0	



Appendix 3: Number of TPP 7120 assignments completed

Assignments	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1-3	68	18.6	18.6	18.6
4-6	56	15.3	15.3	33.9
7-9	31	8.5	8.5	42.3
Valid 10-11	175	47.8	47.8	90.2
NA (extended)	36	9.8	9.8	100.0
Total	366	100.0	100.0	



Students who complete 10-11 assignments are considered to have completed TPP 7120, though not necessarily successfully in terms of achieving a passing grade. The N/A slice in yellow refers to students who have extended the period of study into the following semester