JOURNAL OF THE AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND STUDENT SERVICES ASSOCIATION

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Editorial

The range of articles in this edition of JANZSSA illustrates the diversity of interests and experience that exists amongst student services professionals. The three peer reviewed articles deal with the complexity of issues around student mentoring, language and literacy support, and mental health respectively. Each of these articles contributes new findings to the body of knowledge in these three different areas, each of which are of great significance in terms of successful student outcomes.

In addition to the peer reviewed articles, this edition features two presentations from the ANZSSA Biennial Conference held in Sydney in December 2011. We are fortunate to be able to publish here the keynote address given by Professor Penny Boumelha, Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic) from Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. Professor Boumelha's paper provides a thoughtful insight into the policies and practices which have the potential to either encourage or discourage inclusive participation in higher education, using comparative examples from both New Zealand and Australia. The second conference presentation published here provides a powerful illustration, through a real life case example, of the transformative power of encouraging and supporting people with disabilities in the workplace.

Finally, we have two case examples from the higher education sector. One is a personal and truly inspirational story, narrated in the first person, from a student facing very difficult challenges, while the other addresses the challenges of engaging and supporting students in an on-line, multi-institutional environment.

We would like to thank those authors who have contributed to this edition and also to thank our reviewers, who often review articles at short notice and within a tight time-frame, on top of their many other commitments.

We would also like to encourage all readers to consider submitting articles to JANZSSA, whether they be case examples, new ideas, examples of good practice or research findings. Articles can be submitted to be peer reviewed or not, and we welcome all contributions. Guidelines for would-be contributors are at the end of this issue.

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Mental Health and Higher Education Counselling Services - Responding to Shifting Student Needs

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Abstract

The rising numbers of students in higher education with mental health issues has become a policy concern. With a specific focus on student counselling services, this paper highlights the historical role services have played in responding to changing student cohorts over time. An overview of counselling services development is provided within the broader influences of the mental health field, federal policy directions, and the higher education environment. The shift from counsellors providing academic guidance only to today's model of health promotion and crisis intervention is explored. Finally, ways in which higher education providers may change in the future in response to greater student need is provided.

Introduction

Over the past few decades, mental health issues in the university student population have been on the rise both in prevalence and complexity. This in turn has resulted in an increase in demand for counselling support and services outside of the traditional brief intervention model. With many institutions looking to expand student enrolments and diversity, we can only anticipate that this demand will continue to rise with larger student numbers.

This has a number of implications for higher education institutions. The authors consider these implications by reviewing the historical development of student counselling services within the Australian context, from providing solely academic guidance to today's model of health promotion, outreach, and crisis intervention. The tensions of providing for the needs of students within the wider organisational context is noted, particularly the difficulties in meeting both business and individual needs. Over time, the prevalence and complexity of mental health issues within the higher education setting has escalated, with as many as half of the current attending student body experiencing a depressive episode at some point during their study (Furr, Westefield, McConnell, & Jenkins, 2001). The resulting pressure on university counselling services to cope with demand is shown by examples from our own institution, which has experienced a doubling in demand for counselling services over the past decade. Finally, we consider what the future might hold for higher education providers when it comes to meeting the future mental health needs of our students.

Mental health concerns within the higher education environment

It is difficult to know with certainty the exact numbers of university students who experience mental health issues due to differences across data collection methods. Mowbray et al. (2006) has estimated that approximately 12-18 per cent of tertiary students have a clinically diagnosed mental health condition. However, this would be a conservative estimate of the actual numbers of students requiring counselling support. In one higher education student survey, as many as 53 per cent of those surveyed reported experiencing episodes of depression (Furr, Westefield, McConnell, & Jenkins, 2001). Similarly, the American College Health Association found that as many as 45 per cent of students experienced times of severe depression to the extent that they had difficulty functioning (ACHA, 2004).

In addition, there is evidence that mental health issues in the student population may be on the rise. An increased prevalence in clinically diagnosed mental health conditions over the past five decades has been noted by a number of researchers (Cook, 2007; Osberg, 2004). This is supported by Benton et al. (2003) who analysed a post-secondary counselling services' clinical case notes over a 13-year period and found that the

numbers of students presenting with diagnosed mental health conditions had increased significantly over time. Students were also found to present with more complex problems, including anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, sexual assault, and personality disorders. Similarly, Guthman et al. (2010) found that the number of students presenting with either moderate or severe depression had increased from 34 to 41 per cent over a 10 year period.

At the author's own institution, the numbers of students presenting at the Disability Support Service with diagnosed mental health conditions appears to be steadily increasing. In 2007, the total number of students signing up for disability support was 562 students. Of these, almost 30 per cent of students reported their main disability as a diagnosed mental health condition. Over the past few years, this proportion has increased to 35 per cent in 2008-09 and in 2010, almost half of the total number of students who attended the service reported a diagnosed mental health condition.

Guthman et al. (2010) has hypothesized that this increase in mental health conditions is due to greater numbers of students enrolling in further study with pre-existing conditions. Advances in medical diagnoses and treatment have enabled these students to pursue options that may not have been open to them in previous decades. For instance, over the 10-year period Guthman et al. (2010) describes, the numbers of students on prescribed psychiatric medications increased by 10 per cent. Other explanations for the jump in mental health cases may be partially accounted for by the more general increase in student diversity in recent decades. Students who come from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, who are living in rural and remote areas, who are physically or intellectually disabled, gay, lesbian or transgender, and/or who are involved in substance abuse have been identified as being in greater need on average than their peers in requiring individualized mental health support (DoHA, 2004).

Regardless of the reason, the jump in student numbers presenting with mental health needs as well as case complexity is resulting in higher education's counselling services requiring significantly more resources in order to cope with demand. The numbers of individuals accessing the authors' university's counselling services has shown a steady increase over the past decade from 783 clients attending the service in 2000 to 1,501 clients accessing the service in 2010. This amounts to a doubling in demand over the past 10 years.

This is partially accounted for by a corresponding increase in student numbers at the university over the past decade, although a far greater proportion of students are now seeking counselling support than they were in the past. The percentage of the student body seeking counselling support was only 3.4 per cent in 2000, compared to 5 per cent in 2010. Aside from face-to-face sessions, counselling staff members are increasingly being relied upon for secondary consultations. These refer to staff providing mental health advice to a third party, such as academic staff, medical and allied health professionals, crisis intervention teams, etc. As for client numbers, secondary consultations and urgent cases have also grown in recent years. Staff members were called on to assist in 176 secondary consultations in 2004 compared to 468 secondary consultations in 2010. This amounts to a doubling of secondary consultations in recent years and an increase in urgent cases of 15 per cent from 2005 - 2010.

The relationship between student services, mental health and academic performance

These figures should be of great concern to higher education providers as poor mental health impacts directly on academic performance. Research undertaken by La Trobe University's Counselling Service found that students with diagnosed mental health conditions reported difficulties with motivation, concentration, and confidence, all of which impact negatively on the ability to persist and succeed in a tertiary environment (LTU, 2007). A mental health condition can also impact more generally on a young person's growth, social development, and personal relationships (DoHA, 2004).

Additionally, a number of authors have found that psychological symptoms are a significant predictive factor of student retention (Fisher & Hood, 1987; Osberg, 2004). *"Emotional health"* was the highest rated reason contributing to student attrition in the Centre of the Study of Higher Education (CSHE) student experience survey in 1999, 2004, and 2009 (James, Krause, & Jennings, 2010). Students experiencing

mental health symptoms, and who remain untreated, are thus far more likely to leave university before completing their studies.

Providing personal support is one way of assisting these students persist in their study. Wilson et al. (1997) analysed the records of 562 students who had requested counselling services for personal reasons. They found a direct correlation between the number of counselling sessions and student retention, with an increase in session number corresponding to an increase in the likelihood of student retention. The authors found that retention likelihood increased up to a maximum of 6 sessions. Similarly, Richinson and Rutherford (1995) found that 16 students at 'high risk' of leaving the university all successfully completed their studies after being offered personal counselling support.

Aside from assisting the individual student, student retention relates directly to the costs of running a university. Student attrition remains a significant cost for Australian universities. Adams et al. (2010) estimates this cost to be equivalent to $17,000 per year per international student who departs earlier than planned, and $14,000 per year per domestic student. Overall, the total cost to a single university of student attrition was approximated at $36 million. In Australian dollars, a single per cent increase in student attrition rates would contribute an additional $2.6 million to the university (Adams, et al., 2010). Osberg (2004) puts it another way – using American figures, he calculates that a counselling position costing $40,000 annually pays for itself if the counsellor is able to assist just 3 students who otherwise may have left the institution if they had not received personal support.

Higher education counselling services are thus seen as having an active role in contributing to the larger organisation. Over time, the services provided by counselling has grown, rather than diminished in scope. Aside from traditional individual sessions, counselling staff time is filled with group work, crisis intervention, health promotion, outreach work, staff education and advice, as well as liaising with external health providers. Counselling staff may also find a significant portion of their day filled with case management duties related to a particular student with complex needs.

However, this diversity was not always the case and the complexity of student services has evolved over the past several decades from that of providing academic support only to the wider goals of promoting mental, emotional, and social wellbeing. This evolution cannot be understand without a brief overview of the broader influences of the development of mental health as a field, federal policy directions, and the higher education environment.

Evolving contexts – an overview of student counselling services over the past several decades

Establishment of student counselling services

Although the study of the mind has been a topic of interest for centuries, the rise of the modern-day psychology profession begun towards the end of the Second World War. The work carried out by military psychiatrists at the time recognized that mental health conditions were far more prevalent than had been acknowledged previously. In addition, large numbers of service men and women returned to their home countries in need of rehabilitation.

In response, governments began to take a broader interest into the area of mental health and together with medical lobbying for federal intervention, the United States signed into law the *National Mental Health Act* in 1946 which was one of the first acts to dedicate resources specifically for mental health into research, the training of mental health professionals, and the establishment of new treatment clinics (Millon, 2004). Australia followed closely behind with the first postgraduate professional course in psychology created in 1949 by the University of Western Australia (Gorman, 2007).

At the time, mental health treatment followed a strictly clinical model. Individuals diagnosed with a chronic or severe mental health condition were usually removed from their communities and placed into state care. These institutions varied in quality, however, reports of questionable treatment, overwhelmed workers, and misuse of medical authority soon began to filter into the public awareness.

Within the higher education setting within Australia during this period, the attending student body was fairly homogenous, consisting mostly of the elite upper classes. By 1961, only 0.6 per cent of the population was enrolled in higher education study (Dobson, 2003). Despite the small numbers, there was some concern amongst higher education providers regarding the high percentage of student attrition and recognition that additional support for students outside of the classroom may assist the university in retaining its student numbers.

With this in mind, Melbourne University was the first institution to appoint a full-time student counsellor in 1954 and by 1960, seven of the existing nine higher education providers had established student counselling services (Quintrell & Robertson, 1997). Rather than therapeutic, the role of the student counsellor during these early years was focused on the institutional goals of assisting with student selection and attrition. Counsellors undertook tasks such as student aptitude testing, conducted classes in study skills, and gave guidance on career and course selection.

However, the Australian higher education landscape was soon to change with the aging baby boomer generation resulting in increased numbers of individuals completing secondary schooling (Gale, 1994). The expansion of higher education to the general population became a government priority, with the 1964 Martin Report stating that, *"..in Australia it is widely accepted that higher education should be available to all citizens according to their inclination and capacity"* (Martin, 1964, p. 1).

The move to client-centred therapy

The 1970's brought with it large declines in manufacturing and mass production and the demand for unskilled workers consequently rapidly declined to reflect organisational changes (Hatch, 1997). Under Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, the Labor government at the time assumed greater responsibility for the provision of public services, including education. Whitlam saw education as a key vehicle for social mobility, as he stated in 1972, *"education is the key to equality of opportunity"* (Whitlam policy speech, in Marginson1997: 17). The federal government assumed sole responsibility for the funding of universities in 1974 and introduced 'fee-free' higher education study as well as student income support with the Tertiary Education Assistance Scheme (Dobson, 2003).

In the mental health field, professional courses in psychology were by now provided by most higher education providers and counselling services for students were routinely established with each new higher education institution or college. Carl Roger's work on 'client-centered' therapy was gaining popularity, as too was the influence of the feminist and activist movements (Gorman, 2007). The emergence of newly created prescribed drug treatments led to significant improvements in the severity of symptoms experienced by mental health sufferers. The success of these treatments together with the unpopularity and limited success of state institutions prompted the move from institutionalizing those with mental health conditions towards treatment within the community. A public health model for the management of mental health began to gain some traction with an emphasis on preventative, rather than custodial treatment methods. Unfortunately, the move to community care took place without much needed funding and support with the result that severely unwell patients were released from state institutions in greater numbers with nowhere to go and little support (Smith & Gridley, 2006).

Within higher education counselling services, the emphasis on purely academic support was replaced with the now dominant model of individual personal therapy. In line with the activist spirit at the time, Quintrell and Robertson (1997) write that counsellors viewed themselves as student 'champions' and took on the role of advocates and adversaries. In direct contrast to previous decades, counsellors saw themselves as serving the students, rather than the institution's needs.

Service diversification, economic efficiency, and risk management

The early 1980's brought about a dramatic shift in government policies and ideologies with the move towards an economic rationalist model that saw the privatization of a range of government-owned industries, including banks and utility services (Mendes, 2008). In turn, universities were expected to operate on a

business model, which brought with it the related actions of demonstrating profits, cost-effectiveness, and quality control.

To expand the higher education system whilst limiting the costs, the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) was established in 1989 whereby students were expected to pay a portion of the cost of further study upon graduating as an income-contingent loan (Marginson, 1997). The additional costs were justified by the private gains in income post-graduation. Whereas the previous Whitlam era had viewed higher education as a public good, HECS brought with it the idea of the 'user pays' for the private goods further study offered.

Diversity in higher education obtained renewed interest in the 1990's. Equity groups were designated in the 1990 policy "A Fair Chance for All", including female students, students with disabilities, students from low socio-economic backgrounds, Indigenous students, and students living in rural areas (NBEET, 1990). The policy also introduced mandatory reporting on the numbers of students from each equity group who enrolled, participated, and graduated from higher education.

Higher education providers were also now bound to adhere to anti-discrimination laws that were introduced in the early 1990's. In Australia, the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (CoA, 1992) outlined the obligations institutions would be obligated under with regards individuals with disabilities, which included mental health conditions. It was supported by the Equal Opportunity Act 1995 which had the objectives to:

(a) to promote recognition and acceptance of everyone's right to equality of opportunity; (b) to eliminate, as far as possible, discrimination against people… (CoA, 1995) Sect 3.

In the mental health field, mental health conditions became strictly defined in Australia under the Mental Health Act in 1983 and the federal government began to assume a major role in delivering mental health initiatives with the first national mental health plan released in 1992 (Smith & Gridley, 2006).

The economic influences of efficiency and efficacy on healthcare are also worth noting. The message was one of serving more people for lower cost. Mental health professionals were encouraged to 'do more with less' by carrying out fewer individual sessions and carrying out only those treatment methods which had been shown to be most effective. Whereas previous treatment favoured the analytic and humanistic schools of therapy, the dominant treatment model was now one of changing behaviour through cognitive-behavioural work as well as pharmacological management.

The management of mental health was further shaped by societies increasing preoccupation with 'risk' and its management (Beck, 1992). Due to the assumption that decisions can be made about how risk was managed and thereby avoided, public liability and accountability has become a key feature of risk culture. Formalised client risk assessments have become a key response of social agencies with many mental health professionals relying on diagnostic, suicide, domestic violence, and family violence risk assessments (Kemshall, 2002). Despite criticisms of such risk assessments due to the difficulties of accurately predicting human behaviour (Gillingham, 2007), these instruments are now routinely used as a means for detecting those who are most in need of services. Individuals are categorised as either high or low risk and agency resources are allocated accordingly. The result is that many mental health services were forced to focus on the management of risk and crisis intervention rather than investing in follow-up care and treatment.

In universities, counselling services began to diversify offering individual treatment as well as group sessions in social skills, assertiveness, stress management, sexuality, and numerous areas of personal development. Services also began to respond to the ongoing tension of serving two at times opposing interests –meeting the needs of the student as well as those of the institution. Today, there is greater demand for services to demonstrate 'value for money' by showing measurable proof of student outcomes which are directly relevant to the operating costs of the institution.

In 2007, the Australian Labor government's commissioned review of Australia's higher education sector suggested that the numbers of new graduates would not keep up with demand in the workforce (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). It was anticipated that future employment demand would continue to be for professional skilled, rather than unskilled, workers. Consequently, there has been renewed interest in

looking to higher education to increase the numbers of new graduates. Recently, the continued drive for both economic growth and equity has seen higher education institutions increase in both student numbers and diversity.

Concurrently, mental health has become an area of national priority with the Australian government designating $2.2 billion over the next 5 years to mental health initiatives (CoA, 2011). The National Mental Health Strategy is updated regularly and has been joined by the National Suicide Prevention Strategy as well as the National Strategy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People's Social and Emotional Wellbeing. With influences from the World Health Organisation, health is seen as a socio-ecological product. As health is *"created and lived by people within the settings of their everyday life"* (WHO, 1986: 3), it follows that good health is best achieved by investing in settings outside of the health sector. Investment into settings-based health promotion have developed into initiatives such as 'healthy cities', 'healthy schools', and more recently, the 'health-promoting university', with the argument that universities are well placed to provide students not only with opportunities to learn, but also contribute positively to their personal and social development. Many institutions have since adopted health promotion policies and initiatives with enthusiasm.

Future developments and challenges

Despite student support services being in place for decades and many universities acknowledging the importance of health promotion, it is anticipated that the mental health needs of tertiary students will become ever more paramount. The average tertiary student spends far less time on campus than in previous decades. The majority of students are now involved in paid work during semester time with the majority of students working to support their basic needs. It is not surprising that the most common stressors for students today are trying to achieve a study-life balance and coping with financial worries.

Historically, student support services have been the primary means of dealing with students with mental health concerns. The result is that services are seen as the only solution to the problem. This has segregated services from the rest of the institution and placed the bulk of the responsibility for mental health onto counselling staff members. However, this model is no longer sufficient to meet student demand and universities will need to develop ways of incorporating mental health awareness throughout the institution.

Research undertaken by Hyun et al. (2006) found that one of the most significant ways of preventing mental health difficulties from developing in tertiary students is to forge strong links between students and faculty and administrative staff. As Hyun writes, "…*for students in distress, contact with sympathetic administrative staff and faculty advisors who are willing to direct them to appropriate services is critical*" (Hyun et al, 2006, p. 262). For instance, University College London runs regular workshops for staff in recognizing the signs of mental distress in students (UCL, 2011). Ideally, all staff should be equipped in recognizing the mental health needs of students, comfortable being proactive in asking students if they require support, and knowledgeable about what follow-up action to take on behalf of an individual they are concerned about.

Universities will also need to come up with innovative ways of reaching larger numbers of students in an efficient manner. Aside from the larger numbers of students turning to student support services for assistance, studies have found that only 20 per cent of the numbers of students who need support actually seek help (Furr, et al., 2001). The numbers of students turning up at the service are a conservative estimate of the total number of students who could benefit from further support. With this in mind, the University of Hong Kong offered a semester long assessed course in mental health literacy which introduced the concepts of stress, depression, and suicide. The course was open to all undergraduate students, regardless of the student's background or chosen course. Utilizing a cognitive-behavioral approach, students were given techniques for reflecting on their mental state and strategies for dealing with stress, low mood, anger, and conflict. In 2007-08, approximately 220 students from a range of backgrounds enrolled in the course. The university's rationale for introducing the course was that university students require "*both intellectual and psychological competences to meet future challenges*" (Wong, 2009).

In responding to crisis situations, universities will need to become more flexible in their approach. Traditional opening hours between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. weekdays will no longer be sufficient. Morgan State University in Baltimore is one of a number of institutions which has a counsellor available on-call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Other institutions will fine-tune ways of identifying those students most in need by working together with secondary feeder schools, faculties, and student administrative bodies. Since we know poor mental health is a potential factor contributing to academic performance, this information may be an opportunity to inform students of available supports. Our own institution is currently trialing ways of identifying students at risk of academic failure early on in their academic journey and referring them to appropriate services.

In larger institutions, counselling services will continue to become more diverse and specialized. Counsellors will work with the student, but may – assuming of course that professional codes of conduct have been followed, such as privacy and confidentiality - also find themselves engaged with the student's family, peers, and wider community. Despite an increase in demand for services as well as job complexity, support services are likely to have continuing difficulties in meeting demand with the same or fewer resources. With a changing student profile and increasing complexity in mental health presentation, it is essential that higher education providers respond to the future mental health needs of students by facilitating better understanding amongst staff and fellow students.

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Learning in Transition: Culture to Culture

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Abstract

This paper documents a study concerning students' transition from their initial study settings to the Curtin University (CU) learning culture of practice. The principal aim of this research was to better understand students' learning needs as they move from one learning culture to the next with a view to optimising study experiences and retention, particularly for students at risk. Data from student writing tasks and interviews were analysed, along with common student errors and difficulties emergent from student assignments. Findings were then aligned with the services and resources provided to students by the Communication Skills Centre which forms part of the Curtin Business School (CBS). Findings reported here have been used to improve understanding of students' learning needs and to assist in fine-tuning student support practices delivered by the CSC at CU.

Keywords

Learning culture, transition, retention, student support

Introduction

This research study set out to examine the learning journey experienced by students as they make the transition from different pre-Curtin University (CU) study settings, to the CU learning culture of practice. The principal aims of this study were to gather information to better understand student learning needs as they transition into a new instructional context, with a view to increasing retention and enhancing tertiary success through a range of services offered by the Communication Skills Centre (CSC) at Curtin Business School (CBS). While the centre offers academic and language support to all CBS students at all levels, the majority of those who seek help are international students. Of particular interest in the current study is the plight of students potentially at risk, such as first time (to Curtin) international students and those entering tertiary study potentially without some of the key study skills generally expected by faculty.

Background

Curtin University is situated in Perth Western Australia. Although regarded as the most isolated capital city in the world, Perth is ideally situated to provide university services to the Asian region and is therefore a key centre of learning for international students. Of the five universities in Perth, Curtin has the largest student cohort with 46,634 students enrolled in 2010. Of these, 15,981 were enrolled in Curtin Business School (CBS). Of the total Curtin cohort in 2010, 42.6% of students were international (Curtin University, 2010). However in CBS, international students represent about 60% of the student cohort. This has required CBS to take a strong role in providing learning and language services, in particular to support international students at all levels of study. In addition, given the many offshore Curtin campus locations and partnership arrangements in operation, CBS must ensure learning support for those international students who have undertaken part of their degree studies in situations where English is not the first language used, and learning standards or practices are not always in alignment with those at the principal Perth campus. When students from these alternative settings undertake higher degree studies, they often encounter performance requirements that differ from their undergraduate degree home country-based standards. This presents a range of learning support challenges for staff at the CSC, and learning opportunities for the students.

Student adjustment and support

International students continue to make up substantial proportions of overall student cohorts in Australian universities. Despite a decline in the overall enrolments by full fee-paying students in Australia on a student visa, in October 2011, the Higher Education sector ranked first by volume of enrolments, recording a 0.5% growth in enrolments from the previous year, with the two largest source countries being China (40.4%) and Malaysia (7.5%) (AEI, 2011). International students come from a vast range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. While it is easy to document the first language and country of origin of overseas students,

what is not so obvious is the nature of their previous educational experience; in particular the culture of learning to which they were accustomed in their home countries. Typically, international students applying to English medium universities need to provide evidence of academic achievement and English language proficiency in order to meet admissions criteria. However, once admitted, they face a raft of challenges when adjusting to their new surroundings not only in terms of culture, but also in the academic expectations made of them throughout the course of their studies. Such challenges have been categorised by Andrade (2006, 131) thus: "Adjustment challenges are primarily attributable to English language proficiency and culture. Achievement is affected by English proficiency, academic skills and educational background."

One of the most significant factors in meeting the challenges of tertiary study is English language proficiency. Not all incoming students have completed a standardised English language test on admission as receiving institutions accept a range of English language admissions criteria (Coley, 1999) including pathway programs, Even those who have met minimum requirements on a recognised English proficiency test are often are surprised to find that ongoing English language development is needed in order for them to succeed academically (Braine, 2002).

In addition, students are offered recognition of prior learning (RPL) and many are admitted into postgraduate courses without necessarily having completed an undergraduate degree in that field. Others may commence their studies at an offshore campus, and complete their degree onshore, thus finding themselves going through a period of adjustment typically experienced by 'first years' when they first arrive. This means that expectations from faculty in relation to course requirements are based on assumptions about the students' prior learning experience and skills. Some students, for example, have been educated in a system where the assessment is based solely on passing exams (Ninnis, Aitchison & Kalos, 1999); while other students, particularly those from East and Southeast Asian backgrounds, are more accustomed to teacher-centred classrooms with less emphasis on two-way communication (Sawir, 2005).

There is no doubt that if universities are accepting students on the basis that they meet minimum English language and academic criteria to commence their studies they then must be willing to provide adequate support to ensure those students have the capacity to meet the academic requirements of the degree in order to graduate. To address the learning support needs of students enrolled at CBS, a fully faculty based learning support service called the Communication Skills Centre (CSC) was established by CBS in 1994. This centre offers a range of services to all students, free of charge, and attendance is optional. The CSC is a significant service provider to all students in CBS, but is particularly focussed on supporting the learning needs of international students from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

If students fail to make adequate progress because of the barriers posed by a range of adjustment factors, they may be deemed 'at risk' and needing intervention. While most universities have support mechanisms in place to assist these students, many do not seek help in time, and find themselves on conditional status, or even terminated, often without understanding the process by which they arrived there in the first instance.

This research study was undertaken in response to a need to address ongoing issues of student retention and academic performance, particularly in regard to student English writing skills and evidence based analysis approach to study and assignment writing at CU.

Data gathering

Data gathering for this research was undertaken in accordance with CU ethical requirements and approval. At all stages of data collection students were informed of their rights and choices in regard to their voluntary participation in the study. The cohort for this study consisted of 32 CBS students in undergraduate and postgraduate courses who also participated in CSC support sessions. Data were gathered using multiple methods. The first involved two writing task activities, one administered early in the semester (see Figure 1), with the second being late in the semester (see Figure 2). In addition to these fifteen minute activities, some demographic information was also sought with a clear declaration to the students that their participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous.

Data were also collected through informal interviews later in the semester with 14 of the students who had completed the writing task, and others who attended one-on-one guidance sessions. Questions used in these interviews were formulated from initial findings emergent from early analysis of the first writing task and

analysis of student assignments. The informal interviews centred on questions about the students' previous student learning situations and experiences, and reflection on their learning journey since coming to CU. Data from these interviews were recorded as researcher notes. To explore another dimension of student performance at CU, fifty student assignment drafts were analysed to determine common errors or difficulties. This process of data gathering involved examining a broad cross-section of student assignment drafts from all six discipline areas within CBS. Having multiple data sources provided a rich body of information for analysis.

The first writing task used for data collection is shown here as Figure 1.

<u>**Activity 1 - Instructions to students**</u>

> **Write a short paragraph about your learning experiences before coming to Curtin University and how these were similar or different to studying here this semester.**

Here are some points that you can use if you like:

- ✓ The way you learn here (discussions/group work/giving your own opinions)
- ✓ How classes are run at Curtin (how lecturers guide you/how tutorials are managed)

Figure 1 Data collection instrument for writing activity 1

The second writing task used for data gathering is shown here as Figure 2.

<u>**Activity 2 - Instructions to students**</u>

> **Write a short paragraph about your learning experiences during this semester at Curtin University and describe some of the activities that most helped your learning.**

Here are some points that you can use if you like:

- ✓ The way you learn here (discussions/group work/giving your own opinions)
- ✓ How classes are run at Curtin (how lecturers guide you/how tutorials are managed)
- ✓ How the Australian culture at Curtin influenced how you interacted with other students

Figure 2 Data collection instrument for writing activity 2

Data analysis

Data were analysed using content analysis, a process originally developed by Miles & Huberman (1984). The approach taken for content analysis was in keeping with what Patton (2002) describes as qualitative data reduction and sense making through examining a volume of data to identify core consistencies and meanings. This approach is also supported by Krippendorf (2004) who contends that such analysis can provide insights for understanding the research phenomena. Data were coded according to categories emergent from analysis which sought to identify common student experiences, expectations, perceptions of their new learning culture, and personal reflections on how their approach to learning was changing. New codes for analysis were created as data were more finely examined.

Analysis of data gathered from the two writing tasks

Data collected from the first round of writing tasks were analysed by coding to identify emergent themes. The first writing task itself revealed two main themes; student learning experience pre-Curtin and post-arrival at Curtin. Further independent coding of the study data by each of the two researchers resulted in agreement that a core group of issues was thought to shape learning for this student cohort. The emergent issues (shown below) were then used as categories within which he data analysis was refined.

1. Student study skills and practices

2. Conceptual issues

3. Culture of learning

Data coded into each of these categories were further coded according to where they sat in terms of pre-Curtin study experiences and Curtin experiences. This gave rise to a number of useful comparisons that described the students' learning journeys and how the differences in the activities and culture of learning practice affected their studies.

The second writing task provided some very different perspectives on how students viewed their CU learning experiences. Analysis of data from this second writing task confirmed much of what emerged from the first writing task, but added a number of new elements that broadened the researchers' understanding of how the students saw their learning change as their learning culture changed. It also gave new insights into the type of, and reasons for, many of the areas of difficulty identified in the student assignments examined.

Discussion and findings

Emergent themes:

Theme one: Student study skills and practices

This category emerged as a result of many clear statements by students in regard to their pre-Curtin and (current) Curtin experiences. It provided strong evidence of differences in the approach to learning that they had experienced, and the kinds of practices that assist learning and aid student retention. Not surprisingly the principal difficulties noted by students in this study were to do with language and the learning setting.

a) Language

Two aspects of language use emerged as critical to learning in an Australian university. The first is concerned with simply having a sufficient command of the English language to be able to keep up with what is being said in class, and the second is to do with being equipped to respond to the lecturer or other students in learning/assessment task activities. Key to this is being able to:

- Interpret the accents used;

- Keep up with the speed of the spoken word;

- Understand the meaning of the words used;

- Be able to respond to questions in a timely manner; and

- Be able to ask questions in "real time" during the learning conversation.

Typically many students coming to Australia, having English as a second language, find themselves struggling with the speed at which that language is used here. One student said:

I am having the difficulties with some lecturers who speak fast and unclear (Indonesian female U/G)

Another referred to the tutorial discussions as a good way to learn, but expressed her limitations in being able to participate because of her language difficulties.

I think the discussion in class is a good way to learn others' thoughts. But for some international student especially whose mother language is not English, they feel that they can't take part in the discussion because they cannot react to others' questions and don't know how to show their idea accurately. (Indian male U/G)

b) Roles and actions

The second key element to emerge relates to the learning setting. Most of the students noted difficulties with adapting from being a passive learner in a transmissive teaching situation where they were given information, to being an active learner which required them to find and use information. Many of the students also noted that they were surprised that at CU they could (and were encouraged to) ask questions of their "teachers" both during the class sessions and afterwards. This was said to be very different from their usual learning experience. The following student comment is typical of many collected in this study:

Curtin provide me more opportunities to express my ideas while in my previous university we usually only listen to what the lecturer tell us in class. At Curtin we need to be able to communicate and play roles in groups. Group discussion has become part of my study. (Chinese female U/G)

Another major difference that many students had to deal with was the assessment process. In certain countries, for example, India, the focus of assessment tends to revolve around passing exams, to the point where less than honest practices are openly tolerated (Ninnis, Aitchison & Kalos, 1999). The emphasis on exams was highlighted by one student when describing his earlier study situation as follows:

In India the education system is totally different. It was very straightforward and we were never given assignments involving research. All we had to do was refer to the text books and copy the answer. The primary method of evaluation was through exams and the best thing was we never had to study everything in the book and the lecturers used to give "the important questions" in class and 95% of the time the so called important questions would appear in the exam. (Indian male U/G)

Theme two: Conceptual Issues

This theme emerged from comments that permeated throughout the entire data set. Almost all of the students made some comment about the fact that they were not required in their pre-Curtin learning settings to formulate their own interpretations or ideas, or to write in an evidence-based (referenced) manner. For example, one student noted:

Our classes here are offering simulation examples and scenarios for us to understand. We get training some logical thinking methodology, critical thinking and writing to providing evidence.

Findings here suggest that most students in this study had not realised at first that they had a paucity of skills when it came to writing in an 'academic' style, and a lack of understanding of how to conceptualise a problem, formulate a solution, and to then communicate that in an appropriate manner. Students expressed surprise at not being 'told' what and how to do things, and perplexed at having to be self-reliant in their studies. Conceptual problems were evident in a large proportion of the student assignments examined in this research.

Theme three: Culture of learning

This theme was built around the largest single body of information provided by the two writing tasks. The following student comments typify their acknowledgement of moving to a learning culture focussed on active learning where the students must develop skills in finding information, synthesising ideas, and building evidence based arguments.

Critical analysis" class make me think more than before and deeper than before. The class is not only teacher giving us opinions but also they communicate with us and leading us to find the way to do critical analysis. (Male Chinese P/G)

A consistent view expressed by students new to CU is their satisfaction for having the freedom to question, to think laterally, and to formulate their own views on things that they would never have attempted before. In a study involving students' adjustment to first year in an Australian university, Ramsay, Barker & Jones (1999, 142) found that 'a number of international students commented favourably on the more open, critical approach to education in comparison to their own countries'.

In their current courses, many students reported that they enjoy the CU emphasis on "understanding and analysis rather than just remembering lots of facts". Some noted they now felt empowered to ask questions "without feeling ashamed" and that "classes here are perfect because we can talk to our teachers and do things for ourselves".

In relation to her previous university study in her own country, one student in the present study said:

We don't have the guts to ask the teacher in front of other students if we don't understand because it may be considered that we are stupid and might bother the teaching time. (Female Indonesian U/G)

Mulligan and Kirkpatrick (2000) found that students looked favourably on lecturers who encouraged interaction and discussion in class. Students in the present study welcomed such opportunities. Despite

misgivings about their language ability, they reported the need to overcome their anxiety in order to actively engage in the learning process.

> *Regarding the culture, it is more independent, required assertiveness and less being sensitive about doing discussions in class and worried about the idea to get challenged. Teacher/student relationship is more equal (at Curtin) rather than patronised. (Female Indonesian P/G)*

> *As commonly found in Western culture education system, the students are expected to be an individual learner who possess many academic skills such as listening to the lecture, takes notes, actively participated in the classroom and dare enough to express the opinions. (Female Indonesian P/G)*

For many CU international students, the choice of whether or not to communicate when the opportunity arises often involves an active decision-making process, or a 'willingness to communicate' (WTC). The term, originally coined by Rubin (1975), has more recently been referred to by MacIntyre (2007, 567) as bridging 'the social processes on interpersonal and intergroup contact, the educational process of language learning, as well as interpersonal communicative processes'. The indications are that at least in the experience of the students who participated in the present study, the skills and practices (of students) mentioned here are not typically evident or supported in other education systems.

Another postgraduate student comments on the difference between the CU approach and the culture of learning she experienced in China:

> *The lecturer always stimulate us to know how to learn deeper knowledge by ourselves. All the study skills that I have learned here will be very useful in my whole life. They are not just school study skills; they are also life study skills. (Chinese female P/G)*

Interview data highlighted students' sense of empowerment to learn by having gained confidence through doing group-based assignments and presentations, something that they had not done in their previous study situations. In addition, they also felt that they had become more resourceful in using study tools for finding and using information from the electronic sources including the university library, as opposed to the "wait for what the teacher would give us to learn" approach that they had been used to previously. It was this development of confidence to take the initiative in their own learning, and to feel sufficiently equipped to stand before a class and present their work, that emerged as a key learning change for many of these students. That confidence was clearly evident also in the manner that these students were able to speak out in the presence of their peers, and to a lecturer, when expressing their views of the education system, the learning activities, and most importantly, how they felt about the learning journey. This was reported by some of those students, to be a life changing experience for them in that they would never have had the courage to be so forthcoming on such matters "with a teacher" in their earlier study settings.

For some international students, being accepted into higher degree studies on the basis of non-Curtin qualifications has caused some difficulties. Some of these students have entered high level study at CU without having acquired the necessary skills in writing in an appropriate manner in English (grammar and style) to achieve an evidence based document, referenced as required.

Not having some of the pre-requisite skills or even just not understanding the need to reference information sources compounds the difficulties for students entering postgraduate studies in a learning culture that demands of them independent learning abilities, rather than a teacher directed approach. To compound matters, students are required to demonstrate a range of skills across different units within the university. One postgraduate student highlighted these kinds of issues in the second writing task in saying:

> *The learning experience in postgrad is quite variance between one unit to another. Some are quite focus on the subject of teaching methodology case studies based, and journal reviews and some others are more into combination of theory and practical. (Female Indonesian P/G)*

For many students language issues impede their progress in tutorial and group-based learning activities. They cannot comprehend quickly enough what was being said (or asked of them) or they are unable to formulate their answers quickly enough in English to keep pace with the conversations taking place. One student noted in her reflection on this matter when working in a group with others from various Asian countries:

Another issue is that all of us are from different countries so we have different accent and speaking style which are different for the others to understand. That is a big challenge for us at first. My English is not very good, sometimes I cannot make my thoughts clear to others and they misunderstand my idea. I asked my housemate, who is a native English speaker to help my spoken English. We talk to each other about everything every day and now both my English and my communication skills have improved. (Female Indonesian P/G)

In the light of comments such as these, it is evident that the learning culture needs learning activities that facilitate a transition from almost no student interaction, to full student interaction, to allow time and experience for the development of language and cognition of that culture of learning.

Student assignment drafts: Problems and difficulties

Findings, emergent from analysis of student assignment drafts, were coded in six broad categories. These categories were established with reference also to what students demonstrated in the writing tasks. What follows is an overview of elements coded using those categories, examples of text from real student assignments, and ways that the CSC seeks to address these issues through the services and resources made available to students.

1. Structure

Poor structure or an absence of structure in student assignment drafts emerged as a considerable problem area. Most CBS student assessment briefs are structured around the unit outline requirements for learning outcomes, theories studied, and performance standards. They are usually accompanied by a comprehensive marking rubric which students can use to format their own documents to mimic how it is to be assessed. Other standardised document structures for reports, essays, literature reviews and the like are well documented in the support materials generally provided to students at CU. The present research found that many of the students lack skills in structuring their work. Typically they make little use of broad structures such as introductions, thesis statements, topic sentences, statement of purpose, headings, inclusions naming (tables, figures etc.), and ways for organising ideas. This results in having poor flow to the document and a loss of clarity or cohesiveness. The following example is one entire paragraph from a postgraduate assignment for a Cross-Cultural Communications unit:

In 2008, the company rejected application for a woman wearing a hijab. She applied for a stocking position at an Abercrombie kids store at the great Mall. Finally in 2004, the company faced discrimination charge against black, Hispanic and Asian employees that was settled for $40 million

The CSC provides ways to address many of these issues through the CLASS short course sessions (see item 2, Table 1), workshops and individual student consultations.

2. Adhere to the topic – answering the question

A common error seen in many of the assignments examined is that students do not adhere to the topic and this often results in their not answering the questions posed by the task. This is of course a common problem for many university students, but was seen in a great many of the assignments submitted by international students in this study. Particular focus was put on this aspect of the assignments examined because the individual consultation experiences of the researchers indicated this to be a major problem for many international students, often resulting in lower grades.

The CSC seeks to address this area of difficulty for students by providing writing classes (item 4, Table 1) individual consultations and resource materials in the form of guide sheets for interpreting assignments and formatting documents (items 7 and 8, Table 1).

3. Grammar

Findings here suggest that the students often know what they want to say but lack the vocabulary and understanding of the nuances and grammar required for writing using academic English. Most noticeable in the assignments examined is the presence of first language use "L1 Interference" which manifests itself as disjointed writing in which the reader is constantly "stubbing their toes on the stony path" due to poor word

choice, inappropriate verb endings, and 2nd language expressions that alter the desired meaning of the text. Such errors are exemplified in the following postgraduate samples:

> *The potential role of small enterprises to stepped up growth in Nigeria, however a number of risk affect they recognize their full potential.*

> *It is necessary for organizations to satisfy these stakeholders need, because it can sustaining a continued supply of resources and help organizations to developing in long-terms.*

The CSC seeks to address this area of difficulty for students by providing writing classes (item 4, Table 1) individual consultations and resource materials in the form of guide sheets for interpreting assignments and formatting documents (items 1, 2, 7 and 8, Table 1).

4. Conceptualising

In most disciplines, students at tertiary level are expected to demonstrate their understanding of the relevant concepts by referring to the appropriate literature and synthesising the ideas of others, while at the same time, taking ownership of the language, and developing their own voice. This is a process that requires ongoing development for all students, but one which is particularly complex for international students.

5. Evidence based argument – referencing

One of the key difficulties for students in this study is writing in a manner regarded as an evidence-based approach, or 'academic' referenced style. This emerged strongly from the writing tasks, interviews, and analysis of student assessment drafts.

A number of students from China and India noted that previously they only used the materials provided to them via a workbook, text, or classroom teacher. They did not seek out other journal or text materials to support their written arguments, and therefore do not have the required knowledge of that process to reference their work. In addition to not referencing their work, many of these students are not familiar with the need (and ways) to paraphrase the words of others, or how to quote other works in an appropriate manner.

With first time undergraduate students this does not represent a great problem, given the foundation learning flexibility available to them; however, for students entering postgraduate studies at Curtin on the basis of overseas degree qualifications (or part thereof) this is a considerable problem. The expectation on higher level students is that they know how to write in an evidence-based manner, and how to appropriately reference their work. Poor performance in this regard causes such students to attain low grades and moreover struggle with their studies, resulting in potential issues for retention.

In response to this, the CSC runs a series of academic writing classes, referencing workshops, and individual tuition focussed specifically on writing for research papers and theses. Services and resources provided by the CSC to address this aspect of student learning are shown as items 4,5,7 and 8 in Table 1 of this paper.

CSC learning support services and student resources

The CSC utilises a suite of services and study resources to enhance learning for students and staff. The approach taken has two main streams. The first stream is built around services and resources developed by the CSC to provide overarching or general learning support services and tools for students. The content and manner of delivery of each aspect of learning support provided by the CSC in this stream is shown in Table 1. The second stream is structured around embedding timely, targeted coaching sessions into lectures and tutorials that form the mainstream of unit (classes) delivery.

The CSC package

Students seeking assistance from the CSC have access to a multi-faceted package of learning support services and materials as listed in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Suite of CSC services

1.	Conversation classes – nine, weekly one hour sessions
2.	Short course for the development of language and study skills – Called CLASS; nine, weekly one hour sessions
3.	Short course: Critical Analysis for Business (CAB). Nine, weekly one hour sessions
4.	Short course: Writing for Publication and Presenting at Conferences. Four, weekly two-hour sessions
5.	Learning skills workshops: four themes. Two hour sessions covering multiple topics.
6.	Guest seminars and tutorials to support specific classes in various business discipline areas
7.	Individual consultations: 30-60 minute 1:1 student consultations to assist with analysing, planning and writing
8.	Resource materials – a large collection of single page learning support materials is available to students in paper-based and online modes. Each item provides an overview of a topic or procedure to support the development of learning and writing skills

Delivery of CSC services

At the commencement of each new semester students attend general course orientation sessions which include CSC staff providing an introduction of the services and personnel specifically tasked with supporting learning in the CBS. Providing such information at orientation is a key part of launching student awareness of support mechanisms aimed at enhancing learning and reducing student attrition . Curtin's orientation approach was noted in commendations made in the 2009 AUQA audit report.

The CSC provides all commencing CBS students with a schedule of study skills workshops, details of learning support services, staff contact details, and ways of accessing all of these through online or over-the-counter booking methods. Such information is provided through face-to-face orientation information sessions and in paper based and online forms. Taking a personalised approach to raising student awareness of CSC services and the staff with whom they will interact is a key part of establishing working relationships with students. Rather than taking a just-in-time problem solving approach to student support, CSC staff seek to develop trust and student confidence by raising their awareness of available support services and how these might enhance their overall learning experience. Many studies have shown the importance of having a positive first year experience and development of study skills in building confidence and providing ongoing support, thus contributing to retention. This is of particular importance for international students who usually have limited knowledge of local culture and support services. Alternatively, some students who are aware of such services may view them as 'remedial' and therefore may not seek help when they should.

Huang (2010) notes the need to undertake context-specific analysis of student learning needs to ensure the appropriateness of the methods used. Such analysis needs to take into account the "different linguistic cultures and variety of institutional environments" (Huang, 2010, 535). Being aware of the vulnerability of international students, and knowing what appropriate support to provide can make the difference between retaining a student and losing them. Staff also need to be equipped with the requisite skills in order to be able to deal with the range of problems presented; for instance, cultural sensitivity, experience with students for whom English is an additional language.

Summary of findings

Analysis of the study data provided many insights into how students perceived their journey to the CU learning culture. Much of what emerged from the writing tasks and interviews confirmed the researchers' perceptions of student difficulties and needs emergent from their analysis of student assignment drafts and CSC service provision experience. The key findings from this study are as follows:

Setting: Culture of learning

   a)   The most common difference in the learning culture noted by students in this study concerned the teaching styles that they were accustomed to. Most of the Asian, Indian, and

Indonesian students indicated that they were used to being in large classes where a transmissive style of teaching and learning took place. This usually meant that they were passive learners who were told what to learn (remember) and what to say (answers to exams or assessment problems). At CU, they now were experiencing a totally different approach that is learner centred and requires students to be more self-reliant in terms of finding and using information, analysing problems, and developing their own solutions.

b)   A key part of adapting to the CU culture of learning practice emerged as a 'willingness to contribute'. This came about as students moved from a learning culture that discouraged speaking out in class or in groups, to the CU learning approach that encouraged student questioning of "teachers" and other students in lectures, tutorials, workshops or group activities. This was a major change of practice for most of the study students and for some a life changing event in that they said it empowered them to contribute and learn because they were no longer afraid of speaking out or expressing an opinion without fear of humiliation or reprimand.

c)   The third key learning setting difference for students in this study overlaps with findings more focussed on study performance and practices. The learning culture that most of the students here were used to required very little (if any) individual research to find and use information even at the most basic level for assignments and writing. Information was simply provided in books and manuals. At CU, students are required to individually (and sometimes in small groups) research their assignment information sources, analyse these materials, form their own understandings, and apply knowledge using an evidence based writing style. Having not done this before, they are mostly unaware of the need to reference and acknowledge the intellectual property of others and they therefore inadvertently (mostly due to a lack of understanding) plagiarise. Although this is a learning element, it is important here as part of their changing learning culture because it sits at the heart of how they have been expected to learn and write, and how that has for many, dramatically changed. This is of most significance for those students who have entered CU at postgraduate study levels (using overseas qualifications or part Curtin degrees to get advanced standing) where the expectation is that they will have advanced research and study skills.

Study and assessment writing performance

a)   An examination of numerous student assignments revealed a pattern of difficulties framed mostly by issues of grammar and English expression. For many students, writing in English presents problems in expressing themselves in the language of their home country, which impedes their communication. A common view with many of the students participating in this study is that they find difficulty in keeping up with what is being said in lectures and group work sessions, and that difficulty is compounded when they try to join the conversation but cannot express themselves well enough, quickly enough, to be an active contributor. Active participation in tutorials or group work is a vital step in being able to understand and articulate key concepts in preparation for tackling assignments. A lack of comprehension and difficulty with expression is compounded when they attempt to write in English; this is further complicated by discipline specific formal academic language.

b)   As noted in the discussion of the learning setting, referencing and the evidence-based approach to writing emerged as a major problem for students coming to CU. They struggle to synthesise ideas from the materials that they have researched, have difficulties in conceptualising and paraphrasing journal articles or other materials, and mostly do not have the skills to appropriately reference what they have used. This often leads to direct copying of sources (seen as quite acceptable in many of their earlier learning settings) and subsequent plagiarism woes.

c)   A lack of structure emerged as a key element in many of the assignment drafts examined. Again, it was felt that the students' previous learning settings did not encourage independent thinking about how to organise ideas, build logical evidence-based arguments, or structure documents. Many of the works examined showed a lack of logical thinking in analysing questions (task) and shaping arguments in answer to those. A great many assignment documents utilised an

approach that saw information provided but no real demonstration of understanding or application of meaning in developing answers.

Conclusion

This research study set out to examine the learning journey experienced by students new to Curtin University (CU) as they make the transition from different pre-Curtin study settings, to the CU learning culture of practice. The items documented in the summary of findings are those things that emerged as critical to shaping student success, and therefore retention, at CU. There were of course many other elements that come into play for students moving from one culture of learning to another where particular expectations and practices shape the learning experiences, and thereby student performance. This study has identified areas of teaching and learning practice that can be tailored to ensure that students coming from overseas learning settings can be assisted, and can operate as flags for CU staff to watch for when looking to support students at risk. In relation to English language proficiency, many departments are introducing their own post-entry language assessments (PELAs). To ensure student retention, early intervention is the key to ensuring that students receive timely support. Students who have been placed on conditional status could be referred systematically to the CSC for assistance.

Further study of these kinds of factors and practices will be of value in determining how the learning culture at CU may need to be refined as the student cohort balance shifts to a more international mix.

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Two Approaches to Mentoring Students into Academic Practice at University

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Abstract

Transition programs aimed at assisting new students to become part of the learning community have been a common feature in Australian and New Zealand universities for many years. The University of New England (Australia) established two new programs aimed at supporting the academic transition of commencing students studying by distance education in 2007. One was a peer mentoring program. The other was an online university induction and academic mentoring program. Evaluation and outcomes, plus an analysis of resources required by each program, led to the online induction program taking precedence over the peer mentoring program. The induction program has been more successful, more risk averse, and more resource effective in introducing students to the academic culture of the university and assisting with their integration into, and comfort within, the academic community. It appears from our experience that academic mentoring is best left in the hands of professional, experienced and continuously employed university staff. The online induction program won a prestigious Australian Learning and Teaching Council Citation in 2011 for an outstanding initiative that effectively supports student learning.

Introduction

A common aim of tertiary transition programs is to open the lines of communication between new students and the rest of the university community. Without access to these communication channels, new students often find it difficult to integrate into the academic life of university and thus engage with their studies. Students studying externally by distance education are particularly in need of extra support because of their physical isolation from the university community. Transition support programs have been a common feature of universities for many years, facilitating this communication process and helping new students to become part of the learning community. This paper reports on a peer mentoring program and an online university induction program and academic mentoring at the University of New England (UNE) aimed at supporting commencing external students' transition into the academic culture of the university. Evaluation and outcomes of each program led to the induction program taking precedence over the peer mentoring program in the provision of academic induction for new students studying by distance education. The online university induction and mentoring program was more successful in introducing students to the academic culture of the university; in assisting with their integration into, and comfort within, the academic community; and in preparing them to be independent members of that community. The peer mentoring program now runs as a personal support program which, whilst no less important to successful transition, is a different role to the one initially envisaged. It appears from our experience that academic support is best left in the domain of trained, experienced and continuously employed tutors and mentors. Annually recruited peer mentors are best utilised to provide personal support that is more social than academic. This is especially the case where lack of resources precludes repeated mentor training and the provision of continuous mentor support.

Literature

Recent changes in higher education, including an increase in non-traditional students many of whom arrive at university lacking the necessary skills to be successful, and a focus on strategies to reduce attrition and increase retention of students, have led Australian and New Zealand universities to implement a range of transition programs designed to introduce students to the practices of the academic discourse community. These include peer mentoring programs where senior students provide support and advice for new students

(Glaser, Hall and Halperin, 2006; Huijser and Kimmins, 2006; Lennox, Terrion and Leonard, 2007; Penman and White , 2006; Pope and Van Dyke, 1999; Treston, 1999) and programs aimed at providing academic induction and mentoring, orientation and learning how to learn (Morosanu, Handley and O'Donovan, 2010; Tindle, 2008; Trotter and Roberts, 2006; Zeegers and Martin, 2001). The former utilises the goodwill and experience of student peers and is mentoring that is more of a helping process (Roberts, 2000, p154) that is based on the mentor's own prior experience but limited by the mentor's lack of expertise. It is fundamentally socialising mentoring (Deutsch and Tong, 2011, p161). The latter involves professional tutoring and mentoring, involving a teaching and learning process (Roberts,2000, p154) and the transmission of knowledge (Ardery, 1990 cited in Roberts, 2000). This type is instrumental mentoring (Deutsch and Tong, 2011, p161).

Studies of the first year experience of tertiary students in Australia and New Zealand have found overwhelming evidence to support the fact that a student's first year experience can significantly impact on their satisfaction, and that this can determine whether a student persists with his/her studies, and whether he/she will be successful (Erskine, 2000; James, Krause and Jennings, 2010; Krause, 2005; McInnes, James and McNaught, 1995; McInnes, James and Hartley, 2000; Twigg, 2004 cited in Penman and White, 2006). Tinto, whose research is considered seminal in the field of student retention, proposes that students need to develop a sense of belonging to, and engagement with, the institution through social and academic integration (Tinto, 1987,1998, 2009). It is now generally accepted that support for students through transition is crucial in assisting them to develop this sense of belonging and that communities and community participation are key factors in the decision to persist with university study (Erskine, 2000; James, 2001; Jardine ,2005; Yorke, 2004). However, concerns have been expressed about the low numbers of students who actually access such support (Glaser, Hall et al. 2006; Trotter and Roberts, 2006) and questions have been raised about whether students really want 'top down' community building activities or would rather follow their own initiative to derive support that is 'from below' rather than institutionally imposed (Morosanu, Handley et al., 2010, p 666).

Nevertheless, an important factor in student persistence in higher education is the perception of institutional commitment (Jardine, 2005; Tinto, 1993, 2009; Treston, 1999). According to Tinto, "An institution's capacity to retain students is directly related to its ability to reach out and make contact with students and integrate them into the social and intellectual fabric of institutional life" (Tinto 1993, p104). Students' early connections with the university are known to be a critical factor in the likelihood of engaging and persisting with study (James, Krause et al., 2010). Therefore, it is the responsibility of the university to provide opportunities for its students to become integrated into the social and academic communities within the institution. This need to develop a strong sense of community for distance learners is also discussed by Rovai (2002) who argues that this community need not be bound by physical environment but online communities can also be formed.

The findings from the research into attrition and retention are supported by the view that learning is a social activity and involves an ability to engage in a particular community of practice and understand how to manipulate the texts and resources that comprise that community of practice (Wenger, 1998, p95). Newcomers can become participants in a community of practice through 'peripherality' (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998, p100). This refers to their exposure to real practice. As learners acquire the skills and knowledge of the community, their participation within the community of practice increases.

> *"Legitimate peripheral participation" .... concerns the process by which newcomers become part of a community of practice. A person's intentions to learn are engaged and the meaning of learning is configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a sociocultural practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p29).*

As new students learn about their chosen discipline and learn how to learn in the tertiary context, they can move from apprenticeship to more central membership within the community of practice. Indeed, the integration of students into the academic life of the university is core to student persistence and therefore retention (Tinto, 1988).

For external or distance students, access to the community of practice is often remote. Indeed, many people studying by distance are mature age students. Whilst mature age is not a recognised category of disadvantage, there is no doubt that the lives of mature age students are more complex than young school leaver students in terms of family and work responsibilities (Leder and Forgasz, 2004, p183) and that they have different problems of transition (Yorke, 2001). Not least amongst these is fear and self-doubt (Stone, 1999). The development of physical social learning spaces has been prevalent in response to the first year experience literature (Matthews, Andrews and Adams, 2011) but these are not usually accessible by students studying remotely. Additionally, distance education students need to be supported in becoming competent in online learning and understanding how to operate and interact in virtual learning environments (Mc Loughlin, 2002). There is all the more reason then, that distance students need to be provided with easier access to learning communities, and mentoring within those communities and hence into the discourse practices of the university community (Connor and McKavanagh, 1998; Kennedy, 2004; Rovai, 2002; Sturgess and Kennedy, 2003).

A key question facing universities with large numbers of students studying by distance is: which type of mentoring works best to achieve desired outcomes in terms of successful academic transition for external students?

Context

UNE has a diverse mix of students. Over 80% of our students are external students who study by distance mode in online or blended learning formats. In addition, UNE attracts a substantial number of students from regional and remote areas (approximately 40% in 2010), as well as many from low socio-economic backgrounds (over 16% in 2010). Membership of these latter two groups often indicates disadvantaged educational experiences due to isolation or lack of resources and opportunity (e.g. Trotter and Roberts, 2006).

Notable findings of a 2005 project *Understanding Attrition at UNE* (Anderson and McCrea, 2005) were that external students felt they were not part of a learning community and that there was not enough interaction between them, other students and UNE staff. A review of distance education at UNE in the same year recommended that transition support for internal and external students be extended beyond the traditional orientation period through first semester of study. Furthermore UNE should clarify how student support services can play a significant role in helping students cope with both academic demands and various personal problems, and provide appropriate contact information (University of New England, 2005).

In response to these recommendations a peer support program that was already in place for on-campus students was redesigned to suit the context of external study and piloted in 2006 (see Godwin and Wijeyewardene, 2006). Steps were also taken to adapt an existing face-to-face university preparation program to the online environment. Both programs were offered by academic staff within UNE's Teaching and Learning Centre to commencing external students in 2007.

Distance peer mentor program

This program aimed to link newly enrolled external students with graduates of UNE who had studied by distance education. The mentors were required to complete an online training module which focused on an understanding of the role of the peer mentors in supporting mentees to develop effective study skills and independent learning strategies. Information about the student support services already in place for students at UNE, communication skills and referral skills, and discussion about reasons for student attrition were also included in the training.

Clear guidelines were developed to ensure that mentors understood that they were not expected to provide specialised academic assistance; how to avoid providing advice that might be risky or which did not support the ongoing development of their mentees as independent learners; and how to ensure that they would not be exploited by mentees who were dependent learners. The guidelines' central theme was the Chinese proverb: *Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime* (origin not known), meaning that the type of help they were to give was solely about assisting mentees to find the

answer for themselves to achieve the task at hand or to access the expert help provided by the University. The mentors were to provide a first line of defence against their mentees feeling unable to seek assistance or not knowing or remembering what assistance was available, consistent with the view that induction and information about student support services should be much more of a process than an 'event' which happens in the first few days of university (Dhillon, McGowan and Wang, 2008, p 291).

At the beginning of each year, a series of telephone and video conferences were held for mentors to provide an opportunity to discuss their participation in the program, their expectations of the program and their role, and to give them the opportunity to speak with other mentors and with the coordinator of the program. In addition, an online learning management system was set up for mentors to contact the coordinator and other mentors with questions or suggestions. This was intended to be an ongoing resource for mentors to allow them to access and communicate with other mentors as well as being a training and support tool.

Mentors were required to contact their students at least four times through the first semester, at times identified as critical in the *Understanding Attrition at UNE* report (Anderson and McCrea, 2005). These are at the beginning of the semester, before the census date (after which student fees are binding), mid-semester and before the exam period. It was also recommended that mentors contact their students early in the second semester to find out how they went in first semester and to provide encouragement, reassurance and congratulations as necessary.

In the first year of operation, 97 mentors were recruited and 968 commencing external students signed up to be mentored. In the second year, 75 mentors were recruited and 452 commencing external students signed up to be mentored.

Online university induction and academic mentoring program

This fully online, free program was of three weeks duration and offered to commencing students prior to each semester. On average 150 students enrolled each time the program was offered. It introduced students to the academic literacies necessary for successful study in a way that ensured that they acquired the capacities to use the university's virtual learning environment (VLE). Assessment and feedback tasks utilised a wide variety of VLE features such as quizzes, discussion tools and activity worksheets. Participants were introduced to scholarly values, academic culture and integrity, and writing skills. They were encouraged to produce quality work within time constraints after which feedback was shared anonymously so that participants could learn from their own and others' work. All parts of the program and tasks were voluntary with participants encouraged to do as much or as little as they wished. Many were very selective about how they engaged with the materials and the academic mentors. Some submitted assessment tasks multiple times, others engaged only in the online quizzes, some simply asked questions or observed.

Throughout the program, participants were linked into the various support networks that they would be able to use throughout their degree program at UNE. These included the learning support unit, the university library, counselling and careers services, and various student engagement initiatives. Furthermore, participants were encouraged to meet with other students online and support one another, using the discussion tool in the learning management system. The overall approach of the program was to encourage students to develop independent learning skills necessary for success in tertiary education and lifelong learning.

Evaluation

Each program was evaluated annually to determine impact, effectiveness and avenues for improvement. Surveys were distributed via email to all participants who could then choose between returning them via email or post. The survey questions were designed to investigate impact on transition to university study including confidence and self-esteem, persistence and academic outcomes. At the same time staff perceptions and views were interrogated through focus group meetings aimed at reaching an understanding of the human resource effectiveness of each program. The results of these evaluations were later the basis for a critical decision about which type of mentoring, socialising or instrumental (as described by Deutsch and Tong, 2011, p161) worked best in the face of critical human resource issues.

Evaluation of the peer mentor program was dogged by poor response rates. In 2007, the first year of the peer mentor program, there was a 5% response rate. In the second year there was a 25% response rate. However, the majority of respondents rated the peer mentor program highly, with between 76 and 80% of respondents across the two years indicating that it had assisted them to become a successful external student.

Feedback from mentors in 2007 and 2008 was generally more forthcoming (90% and 82 % response rates respectively) and also positive. However, many mentors expressed disappointment about the many mentees who did not engage at all in the program. Indeed, this resulted in the withdrawal of a number of mentors, particularly in the first year of the program. Feedback from mentors about problems encountered included:

> *Managing the disappointment that students were not interested in making contact; No answer when you contact a student; Apathy towards the program; and Making regular contact when often one sided (Student evaluations, 2007-08).*

Similar views were expressed via email and online discussion with the program coordinators. For example:

> *I have made most reasonable attempts to contact (my mentees) and by and large, the response was nil. To keep attempting would be improper. I find it dismaying that students forward their names for support and then, without the least bit of courtesy, abandon the mechanisms put in place for their benefit (Peer mentor, online discussion forum, 2007).*

Other mentors were more philosophical about lack of engagement by their mentees. For example, one mentor said she did not have any expectations about the level of involvement from students, and that it was often a one-way relationship with silence as the reward, but that '*no response does not equate to no value*' (Peer mentor, email, 22.1.08).

This seems to have been true for some participants: It has been good to know that there is someone I can call if I need any help – even though I haven't actually needed any help; and I didn't feel I needed the support (but) it was nice to know someone was there if they were needed (Student evaluations, 2007-08). This could very well be a reason that so many students did not reply to emails from mentors – they did not need the help at the time, but still felt reassured that someone was there if necessary. Peer mentors also discussed this fact. In fact, one mentor commented: I see my role as akin to a fire hydrant on a boat – it's good to know it's there, but I won't use it if I don't need to. (Peer mentor, email, 22.1.08)

Despite this, the peer support program was able to reach out and provide a positive transition experience for active participants. Many students commented on the benefits of being able to talk to someone who has experienced university as an external student before. For example*:*

> *Good to get a previous distance student's opinion on how this works and who to contact; It was helpful because they had already been through starting out as a new student via distance education and knew what I was feeling; The peer mentor filled the fellow student role that the external student doesn't really have access to. The best thing was the peer mentor has experience and was able to help join the dots for new students; and So many times I felt down and found it (uni) challenging and daunting. The extra support from an outsider that's been through it and someone you can relate to can be beneficial. This program is ... very important to the survival of students studying via distance education (Student evaluations, 2007-08).*

The sense of isolation that students may feel as an external student was also an issue that was raised in the evaluations of the program. For example:

> *It was good to know I wasn't on my own in the 'external uni' world; It made external uni more of a 'real' experience; It made me feel I wasn't alone; The initial contact made me feel less isolated; and I did feel that I was a part of UNE's learning community because I have a peer mentor behind me. (Student evaluations, 2007-08).*

Evaluation of the online induction and mentoring program achieved far better response rates (averaging 66%) over the first two years of the program (2007-2008). The majority of respondents rated the program

very favourably, with 78% in 2007 and 85% in 2008 indicating that it had assisted them to become a successful external student. Many respondents talked about increased confidence as a result of the program. For example:

> *Just wanted to say thank you so very much for the course. It has been a wonderful start to my studies. It has given me the confidence and knowledge I needed to start study after a long break (2007 student);*

> *Distinctions in the first semester after never having studied at tertiary level and over 2 decades since leaving high school, what more can I say? (2008 student).*

Participants responded very positively to the content of the course. For example:

> *(The program) was helpful and informative. In the long lead up to the actual starting date of the semester, I was excited to be able to have access to something. For new students, it gives an excellent opportunity to really work out how UNE operates. I am grateful that UNE offers such a service (2008 student); and I am feeling more comfortable navigating my way through the different areas. Initially the thought of studying via distance was a little scary. However, the support and abundance of information available online really makes me feel at ease (2007 student).*

Students also appreciated the online social engagement component of the program in which they are given the opportunity to communicate with teaching staff, with other students and with key staff from other support areas in the university. Student comments in post-course evaluations recognised the value of this. For example:

> *Meeting people online who were having the same difficulties as I was and knowing that the support services are there if I should need them throughout my studies (2007 student).*

> *Getting to talk to other students that were new to studying externally was really helpful. It eases the feeling of isolation knowing others are feeling the same as you (2008 student).*

Additionally, in a retrospective survey of all 2008 participants a year later, 73% felt that the program had provided them with the skills necessary to succeed, 73% felt they were more confident knowing about the support available, and over half felt that the confidence gained from the program had contributed to their success.

Discussion

The major problem faced by the peer mentor program in its first two years was lack of engagement by many of the students, particularly in the first year. This was also reflected in evaluation response rates. It was surmised that the method of communication with new students about the program played a role in this. In 2007 hard copy forms for registration for the peer mentor program were sent out by mail with enrolment information. In 2008 the enrolment process was fully online. The peer mentor program registration forms were therefore sent out with the Vice-Chancellor's welcome letter. Ironically, whilst there was a lower response rate in the second year to the invitation to sign up for the program, those that did register were far more responsive to approaches from their mentor. This would appear to indicate that students were overwhelmed by too much information when the peer support program information was included in enrolment information and tended to sign up for everything 'just in case', with less thought than when they received the information separately to the enrolment information and with less other distracting paperwork. Therefore, it seems, that those who did register in the second year, did so with more thought and genuine intent. This hypothesis is supported by the evaluation results.

Additionally, the inclusion of information in the Vice-Chancellor's welcome letter may have sent the very important message to new students that the program was institutionally endorsed and supported by the executive. It is known that when such a program has a high profile within the institution, it is more likely to succeed (Treston, 1999; Jardine, 2005; Tinto, 2009).

It is worth noting however, that there are a range of reasons for low level or non-existent mentee participation in peer support programs as has previously been noted (eg Glaser, Hall et al., 2006; Morosanu, Handley et al., 2010). These include 'lack of fit', unfulfilled expectations and irrelevance as other sources of support, such as new friendships, take precedence (Glaser, Hall et al., 2006, p16-17).

A further issue was that a problematic amount of academic staff time was diverted to administrative tasks related to the maintenance of the program, particularly the time taken up by continuous communication with frustrated mentors. The annual training and need for continuous support of the mentors was also time consuming. That program coordination was a source of frustration to busy teachers was a clear theme of the staff focus groups.

A further problem encountered in the first year of the peer mentor program was that despite being explicitly informed of the role of the mentor, many students expected academic assistance (or to be fed fish). While many mentors were able to refer these students on to either lecturers or other relevant student support services, there were some very insistent students who made the relationship extremely awkward for the mentors and the peer support coordination.

The online induction and mentoring program did not experience the same level of difficulty in its first two years. One possibility considered was that because the decision to participate and the set dates of the program required immediate engagement rather than a 'wait and see' approach to participation. Whilst actual completion rates cannot be compiled because of the flexible approach taken, all participants engaged in some or all of the program or downloaded resources. The flexibility, much shorter time period and tangible outcomes were likely to be factors in this. The flexibility and the continuity of the support and mentoring available after the completion of the initial three week program also meant that participants were able to follow their own initiative to derive ongoing support 'from below' (as per Morosanu, Handley et al., 2010).

Also, the program was taught by academic staff and was factored into their workload as teaching time, unlike the more administrative nature of coordinating the peer mentor program. This was far more satisfactory for both the staff involved and for executive staff overseeing budget and funding matters.

Another factor in the relative success of this program was that the academic staff teaching it were also the learning support advisors who provided ongoing academic advice and mentoring support to commencing students, and so continuity in terms of commencing students' transition support was ensured. Additionally, expertise and experience in providing academic advice and support was safeguarded and the risks associated with inexperience were avoided. Similarly, the academic staff were more able to be assertive when dealing with some students' expectations of answers rather than assistance with how to find the answer or complete the task (i.e. learning how to fish for themselves). Thus successful instrumental mentoring (see Roberts, 2000; Deutsch and Tong, 2011) occurred.

The evaluation results also suggested that this program was more successful in establishing networking (see McInnis, James et al., 2000; Yorke, 2004) than the peer mentoring program which, as basically a one-to-one arrangement, was more limited. Being able to engage with other students online is an effective catalyst for meaningful, personable and individual university experience and also helps remove the tyranny of distance and isolation.

The online induction and mentoring program appeared to be more successful at facilitating students' awareness of not only institutional and social networks but also academic culture and expectations, ie sociocultural practice (see Lave and Wenger, 1991, p29). It enabled participants to confidently engage in new communities of practice through 'legitimate peripheral participation' (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p29) thereby enhancing the chances of retention (see Wenger, 1998). Indeed, student evaluation and feedback, as well as teacher observation and reflection, indicated that participants in the online induction program moved through apprenticeship to central membership of the academic community of practice earlier and more 'on time' for their own needs than those in the peer mentor program.

Additionally, and importantly, the online induction program addressed and demystified the online learning experience. For new students studying on campus, there is the opportunity to take a guided tour by someone

who already knows the campus. The online induction program mirrors this in the virtual environment by guiding students around the UNE website, showing them where to find information that will be relevant to them, especially in their first weeks of study. Moreover, participants have the opportunity to experiment with the tools that they will be using during their studies, without the stresses of having to also grapple with new disciplinary content and assignment tasks. They become familiar with the tools and aware of the basic expectations for producing assignments in the university context. The ability to do this inspires confidence in students and an understanding of some of the processes and practices of the university that otherwise may remain hidden, making them more confident to engage with their studies once semester starts.

A significant benefit of the availability of feedback to and mentoring of participants is the promotion of essential metacognitive strategies in the learning process. These include increased self-awareness of one's strengths and weaknesses and the ability to regulate one's learning appropriately to acquire new knowledge. Students who develop these metacognitive strategies are more likely to become motivated, independent learners (Ibabe & Jauregizar, 2010). Finally, the online induction program promoted student confidence which underpins the development of metacognition and self-regulated learning skills (Boud, 1995).

The online induction program was therefore more successful in fulfilling the recommendations of both the *Understanding Attrition at UNE* (Anderson and McCrea, 2005) project and the Distance Education Review (University of New England, 2005): to increase interaction between external students, other students and the UNE staff; to provide transition support that extended beyond the traditional orientation period; and to enhance the role of student support services in transition support. Moreover, this program was more proactive rather than reactive, an approach now deemed more effective in student support (Connor and McKavanagh, 1998, p12).

Outcomes

Before the start of the third year of the peer mentor program, human resources within the learning support unit were diverted to support different priorities within the larger Teaching and Learning Centre and as a result existing academic staff workload had to be reduced. A decision was taken, based on the results described here, to support the growth of the online induction and mentoring program within the Teaching and Learning Centre but not the peer mentor program. With the establishment of a student engagement team within the student administration area it was decided the management of the peer support program should be repositioned within that centre to ensure its survival and to consolidate existing student engagement initiatives. It now has a less academic approach to recruitment, training and support of mentors and promotion of the program to new students and more in accord with Tinto's notion of peer mentors as 'informal advisers' (Tinto 1987, p147) and it is clear that participants benefit from the socialising mentoring and social engagement that the program offers. It is now viewed as one of several students engagement initiatives aimed at meeting the diverse needs and preferences of all commencing students as recommended by Trotter and Roberts (2006), especially those who prefer the personal to more organisational forms of support (see Yorke, 2004, p27).

In 2009 the online induction and mentoring program was opened to students who had already completed one or two semesters, but thought they would benefit from further development of their academic skills. This initiative was instantly supported by lecturers who recommended the program to those students they felt were struggling in their studies. Additionally, a new version of the program has since been developed to specifically target the needs of international students.

Further evaluation of the program and student feedback has continued to be very positive (see Pendreigh and Wijeyewardene 2010). For example, in evaluations between January 2010 and 2011, 78% of students reported that the program had given them the confidence to succeed in their studies. Over the same period, more than 90% of participants rated the course as very good or excellent. Typical student feedback includes:

This has been extremely valuable and a positive experience (2011 student).

As a very long distance student (I'm in the UK), [this program] removed my sense of isolation and made me feel a lot more confident about starting to study via distance ed next year. I also know how supportive UNE's support team are, which is very reassuring (2010 student).

Having never studied at University level before, [this program] has given me a good idea of what to expect and established a good attitude towards my study next year and I feel adequately prepared and confident in all areas (2010 student).

[I liked] Being able to 'chat' to other students. Prior to the (this program), I thought I was the only 40 something doing this, but it was reassuring that I was wrong. I also found the information to navigate around the website invaluable. It has meant that I have not had to waste time surfing now that we have started 'real' study (2010 student).

In 2009, UNE explicitly recognised the program by awarding its teaching team with a Vice Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Learning and Teaching. In 2011, the program was recognised nationally with a prestigious Australian Learning and Teaching Council citation for '**an innovative and equitable online program that leads students to independent mastery of their academic literacy'.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that academic integration into university life is crucial if students are to succeed in their studies. Without effective links to university communities, students may feel isolated and this increases the likelihood that they will not complete their course of study. This is even more so for students who study by distance education and are physically isolated from the university campus.

Of the two transition support programs introduced at UNE discussed in this article, the online induction and academic mentoring program was more successful in facilitating commencing external students' social and academic integration into university. It was also more effective in meeting the University's objective of better supporting the transition of commencing distance education students, especially those from disadvantaged educational backgrounds. It was found to be more effective in initial engagement of distance education students, first with the program itself and then with the university via the program. Outcomes in this regard were consistent with the recommendations of the retention literature - membership of communities of practice was facilitated and participants were better able to make choices about what ongoing support they required after completing the program because they were engaged very early on in their transition year. They were therefore well equipped and well informed enough to choose and access their own ongoing support. The program was more successful in developing independent learning skills by teaching 'how to fish' in accordance with the old Chinese proverb. Moreover, the online program was also found to be more resource effective in terms of academic staff time and less risky in terms of quality provision of instrumental mentoring. This program ultimately took precedence over the peer mentoring program within the Teaching and Learning Centre of the University. The peer mentoring program continues to play a significant role in another department, albeit a different one to that originally intended, but equally important in terms of purely social integration into university life.

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Support for Inclusion:
A New Zealand Perspective

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Abstract

This paper considers, first, the shifting policy settings and funding approaches in Australia and New Zealand and their impacts on approaches to student services; then, the terminologies around inclusion used in different educational systems and on the approaches embodied in them; and finally, the role of student services in an inclusion agenda and how best to identify initiatives likely to be successful.

Australia is entering into a policy and funding environment which is similar to that in New Zealand from the early 1990s until 2007. The volume-driven funding model reflected a strong orientation toward widening access and increasing participation. At universities this created first-year cohorts of students from increasingly disparate educational backgrounds. Total public expenditure on tertiary education increased continually and unpredictably throughout this period, both through direct funding to institutions for increased numbers and associated learning support and pastoral care service, and through the flow-on costs of student access to financial support during this period. This high level of expenditure was the major factor that brought an end to this period of volume-driven funding. In 2008, the New Zealand Government introduced a capped funding system.

In New Zealand the national framework for increased access is currently very largely ethnically based. This approach to defining and managing inclusion has the potential to exclude many students whose prior educational disadvantage results from class and poverty. Adding a socio-economic dimension to the current ethnically focused policy framework in New Zealand would help to strengthen the effectiveness of strategies for inclusion in the university sector.

The policy and funding environments in Australia and New Zealand are currently both in transition. Indeed, in a curious asymmetry of policy development, our two countries seem almost to be changing places. This provides us with an important opportunity to learn from one another.

At present, Australia is entering into a policy and funding environment which, in its key elements, bears a remarkable similarity to that of New Zealand from the early 1990s until 2007. Volume-driven funding was introduced in New Zealand to the tertiary sector as a whole in the early 1990s, and, in slightly varying forms, persisted until 2007. At the same time that volume-driven funding was introduced, the non-university tertiary institutions were given the right to offer both undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. These two major changes combined to create a policy environment strongly oriented toward widening access and boosting participation. However, one significant difference between the approaches taken by the New Zealand and Australian governments is that, in Australia, quite ambitious targets have been set for overall levels of participation and for participation by those from low socio- economic backgrounds. While New Zealand's national Tertiary Education Strategy identifies some priority groups (people under 25, Māori and Pacific students), there were and are no national participation targets established by governments in New Zealand: the drive for expansion was open-ended.

Despite the absence of clear targets, it is nevertheless evident that the policy achieved its primary objective. Participation in tertiary institutions in New Zealand (where the phrase 'the tertiary sector' refers to the whole range of post-secondary institutions, including universities, polytechnics, wānanga or Māori educational institutions, and private providers) increased by as much as 65 per cent between 1994 and 2007 However, the bulk of that increase occurred at the lower levels of sub-degree certificate and diploma programmes

offered in the non-university sector, while enrolments at Bachelor degree level grew by only 25%. A further point of interest was that much of this 25% increase in degree-level enrolments also occurred in the non-university parts of the post-secondary sector, with the emergence of new degree-granting institutions. The number of non-university degrees on offer grew from zero in 1990 to 255 by 2007, and by that year, 14 per cent of degree level students were enrolled in polytechnics, private training establishments and wānanga (Ministry of Education, 2011a).

But if one impact of the volume-driven system in New Zealand was to transform the configuration of the sector, it also had very significant effects on the universities themselves. One of these was the changing composition of the student body. In a volume-driven funding system, institutional advantage and positioning are often seen to lie in opening the doors more and more widely, the emphasis all too easily falling upon simply admitting more and more people rather than upon success. As participation in New Zealand universities expanded over the volume-driven funding period, first-year cohorts of increasingly disparate educational backgrounds were generated. The wide range of levels of preparedness for study had an inevitable impact on the learning opportunities and experiences of all students, both the high achievers and those who had missed out on some key concepts and skills relevant to their chosen field of study. In such a situation, a university must in effect choose either to accept the likelihood of higher rates of attrition, failure and course repetitions or to invest heavily in student learning support and pastoral care services.

In order that a student's experience of university in an open access environment should have a good chance of amounting to more than a significant debt and a sense of failure, New Zealand universities have had to introduce some very different practices in induction and orientation, in bridging and preparatory programmes, in learning and teaching, in assessment, in learning support, and generally in the relationship and implicit contract between students and institutions. Australian universities already invest heavily in these activities, but the evidence from New Zealand is that they will probably have to do considerably more.

It is an all but inevitable consequence of a volume-driven system that total public expenditure on tertiary education increases continually and unpredictably, both through direct funding to institutions and through the flow-on costs of student access to financial support. In New Zealand, successive governments, uncertain about student volume, sought to reinstitute some control over their potential liability by reducing expenditure per student. Over time, the real value of government funding per student in New Zealand fell steadily, to the point that, by 2007, the eight universities collectively received $230m per annum less in government funding than they would have got under the funding levels that prevailed at the beginning of the volume driven system.

To put some institutional specifics into this calculation, the Victoria University of Wellington enrolled just over 15000 equivalent full time domestic students in 2007 and received about $25 million dollars less in direct government funding for those students than if the real value of that funding had been maintained at the level of the early 1990s. This illustrates graphically that the political economy of any volume-driven system is likely to create incentives for governments to drive down the unit price per student, and to do that just as the costs of teaching responsively to an increasingly diverse student body rise.

A number of factors brought an end to this period of volume-driven funding in New Zealand. The most important driver for policy change was the level and, perhaps even more, the unpredictability of government expenditure on tertiary education. Additionally, the rising cost to the Government of the student loan system - interest-free in New Zealand - makes it increasingly unlikely that government funding to universities will be restored to previous levels any time soon. By OECD norms, New Zealand is already unusual in the high proportion of its expenditure that is directed toward financial support for students rather than toward institutional funding (Universities New Zealand – Te Pōkai Tara 2008).

Secondly, because of the wider range of ability and preparedness among the student population, rates of student progression were often unsatisfactory, particularly in the non-university sector, and the proportion of students failing to advance through their programmes of study drew the attention of government to what they saw as wasted investment. This perception of waste has in fact been something of a recurring theme behind developments in both policy and practice in the New Zealand university sector. Brailford, in his history of

the introduction of student counselling at the University of Auckland in the 1960s, points out that some of the early (and successful) arguments in favour of this move were financial: in that period, (2011, p. 362) notes that

> Both New Zealand and Australia had much higher levels of "wastage" than Britain, which, at the time, was the obvious comparison; one in three New Zealand and Australian students failed to complete their bachelor's degrees against only one in seven in Britain.

Accordingly, first advocates of the introduction of student counsellors to the University suggested that the service would quickly pay for itself even if only a few students were successful each year who would otherwise have failed.

Whether or not these arguments proved sustainable over time, it is undeniable that perceptions of wasted public investment played a role in the decision of the Labour Government in New Zealand to abandon the volume-driven system. Instead, in 2008, the Government introduced a capped funding system whereby each tertiary institution negotiates an Investment Plan with the intermediary funding body, the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC). In these Plans, agreement is reached on direct government funding made up of total student numbers in each subject area. Universities, and indeed all tertiary institutions, are required to manage their enrolment levels within a tolerance band of plus or minus 3% of the negotiated levels. Falling below 97% of the agreed level leads to a clawback of funding. Institutions exceeding 103% face unspecified penalties as well as the prospect of less favourable outcomes in subsequent rounds of funding negotiation.

An interesting recent development has been the TEC's decision to withdraw from the negotiating table for these Investment Plans the possibility of funded university places for students in sub-degree programmes. This decision rests upon the basis that universities – required as they are under the Education Act in New Zealand to offer research-informed teaching – are not the appropriate institutional location for preparatory and bridging programmes. It is suggested instead that this is a role the polytechnics should fill, but so far the TEC has shown no great willingness to pressure them to do so. This risks creating a most unhelpful void in the system; at the Victoria University of Wellington, enrolments in the well-regarded Certificate of University Preparation have had to be closed down, and all efforts to work collaboratively with polytechnics in the region to replace it have so far foundered on the rock of funding.

Also a relatively recent introduction into the funding environment is the decision of the Minister of Tertiary Education, through the TEC, to emulate widespread international practice by publishing information annually regarding the educational outcomes of government-funded students. This so-called 'educational performance information' is published with the stated aim of improving public accountability for the investment in tertiary education and encouraging improvements in educational performance. It will also be used to make year-on-year comparisons of tertiary institutions' performance, at least as measured through the proxy of student outcomes. The TEC has suggested that it will be giving particular attention to assessing how well the sector is delivering student achievement outputs for the priority groups identified in the Government's Tertiary Education Strategy.

From 2012, five per cent of the Student Achievement Component funding to tertiary institutions will be based on their performance against the educational performance indicators in the previous year. Four indicators have been identified: successful course completion; student retention; successful qualification completion; and student progression (Tertiary Education Commission 2011). The TEC has flagged its intention to add to these a fifth indicator regarding graduate employment outcomes, once an appropriate way of measuring them has been defined. Clearly, this shift into a culture of performance measurement and public accountability increases the intensity of the institutional gaze on student success, and on the various means at our disposal to advance it (which may well include selective admission processes, stronger advice on student choices of programme and course, or support for learning and general student welfare).

In New Zealand, it is only as we shift from volume-driven funding to negotiated levels of load and managed profiles that it has become apparent how profoundly volume-driven funding has shaped institutional cultures. On the positive side, it is an environment that encourages innovation, permits the taking of risk and

is relatively forgiving of failure. An entrepreneurial culture probably works best in a volume driven system. But at the same time, programme and course proliferation and unhelpful varieties of internal competition become more likely. It was not only in the non-university parts of the tertiary sector that programme proliferation occurred; the Universities engaged in it too. In New Zealand, a Committee on University Academic Programmes established by the peak body, Universities New Zealand, holds statutory authority to approve or reject all proposals for new programmes at any university. The committee's reports show that, in the early years of the volume-driven system, it was approving around 30-35 new programmes each year. At the peak of the volume driven system, the annual number of new programmes approved had tripled. Since then, the number has steadied at 50-60 new programmes per year, still a much higher level than in earlier years.

Reviews of new programmes submitted to Universities New Zealand routinely show that a substantial proportion of these new programmes failed to achieve anything remotely near their projected student numbers. One legacy of the volume-driven era for all New Zealand universities is an array of programmes that are not financially viable in a period of capped funding without significant cross-subsidy from other programmes.

The impacts of the shift from volume-driven to capped funding on models, staffing levels and practices in the student services dimension of universities are only now beginning to manifest themselves. The greatly expanded portfolio of programmes, for example, has introduced significant and so far continuing additional complexity into a whole range of processes and services, from timetabling to programme and course advice, from marketing to learning support. Capped institutional funding has revived institutional tensions within internal budget models around the issue of the relative proportions going to academic and support areas. At the same time, cost-shifting of service support toward student levies and user-pays models has recently led the Minister responsible for tertiary education to complement existing tuition fee regulation by introducing similar regulation of student service levies and the nature and extent of services which they may be used to fund.

The issue of 'value for money' is clearly one that student service areas must always be prepared to investigate and evaluate, but the question has in New Zealand recently taken on a slightly different form: 'value for whose money'? With the legislative regulation of compulsory student service levies has come a requirement that there be joint evaluation and financial accountability between university managers and student representatives. Uses of student-generated income must now be transparent, and the questions student representatives have asked – such as, when does it became unfair for a majority of students to subsidise a service crucial to, but only accessed by, a minority of students? – have introduced a new element into planning and evaluation. Demand for services seems set to remain as high in the capped funding system as in the volume-driven era, but the continuing affordability of the services looks increasingly uncertain.

The second part of this paper is concerned with the issue of how 'inclusion' – and consequently, if only implicitly, 'exclusion' – are defined in New Zealand and the consequences of those definitions. Both the Australian 'social inclusion' agenda and the parallel 'widening participation' drive in the English university sector are focused primarily on what may be variously described as socio-economic disadvantage ('low SES' in the Australian terminology), poverty or social class. So, for example, the template for Compacts for Australian universities requires the identification of pre-determined stages for growth of the 'proportion of domestic undergraduates who are from a low SES background', but only permits the setting of institution-specific participation targets for other underrepresented groups (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2011). And in England, the Higher Education Funding Council has, at least until the recent radical changes in teaching funding, been managing a 413 million pound 'widening participation' funding premium explicitly linked to a social mobility agenda through recognition of the higher costs incurred in teaching part-time students and those from poorer backgrounds (Higher Education Funding Council 2011).

In New Zealand, by contrast, the national framework for increased access is currently very largely ethnically based. In New Zealand, the term 'inclusion' is used much more rarely than that of 'inclusiveness'.

'Inclusiveness' is fundamentally a social and cultural concept; it implies recognising and making space for the cultural values and experiences of diverse groups. 'Inclusion' relates rather more to identifying an excluded margin and shifting the boundaries to move it from outside to inside. The official bi-culturalism of New Zealand society under the Treaty of Waitangi and its de facto multi-culturalism have led policymakers often to slide socio-economic concepts and categories beneath those that are ethnic and cultural. Hence, the prevailing policy terminology in the area under discussion is of 'equity' rather than 'inclusion'. One practical manifestation of this culturalist turn in educational policy is that New Zealand has only very recently moved away in practice from what remains the legislated right of any citizen who has reached the age of twenty to enrol in a university, irrespective of their prior educational achievement or level of preparedness for degree study.

This shift from open access for second-chance learners to a clear focus on young Māori and Pacific people is significantly motivated by the demographic composition of and projections for the country, as well as by their socio-economic situation. So, to choose one of the TEC priority groups as an example, according to the 2006 census data, self-identified Pacific Peoples constituted 7.2 per cent of New Zealand's population in that year. Sixty per cent of those identifying as Pacific Peoples were born in New Zealand. Sixty per cent of them were below thirty years of age, in contrast with an increasingly ageing New Zealand European population. Projections suggest that in 2026, Pacific Peoples will constitute 10 ten per cent of the total population and 14.4 per cent of the youth population of New Zealand. Seventy-seven per cent of Pacific Peoples in employment earned less than $50,000 dollars per annum in 2006 (Statistics New Zealand 2006, as cited in Toumu'a 2011). Unemployment rates for Pacific Peoples sat at 14 per cent in the December quarter of 2009, compared with a rate of 4.6 per cent for the European ethnic group in the same period (Department of Labour 2009).

The data on educational performance are equally stark. In 2009, 35% of Māori had not achieved any school qualification, compared with 18% of non- Māori. In 2010, 42.1% of all school leavers achieved the University Entrance standard (the minimum level of achievement required for admission to university as a school-leaver in New Zealand). Asian ethnicity students had the highest proportion of school leavers achieving UE, at 65.1%, followed by European/Pākeha at 47.3%, Pasifika at 25.6% and finally Māori at only 19.9%.(Ministry of Education 2011b)

As these examples suggest, official statistics in New Zealand are very commonly reported on the basis of (self-identified) ethnicity, and educational policy – together with the practices it drives and validates – replicates those same interpretative frameworks. For example, the small equity funding premium that flows to New Zealand universities is attached to the number of Māori and Pacific students enrolled (with some also for students with disabilities.) Important and powerful though this perspective is, however, it does to some extent also cloud a full understanding of disadvantage. First, in New Zealand as elsewhere, the ethnicity of individuals is rarely a simple and unitary matter. New Zealand statistics are often accompanied by a statement that some people identified with more than one ethnic identity, with the result either that individuals are counted more than once or that some relatively arbitrary choice has to be substituted for the complexity of their own self-perception and they are simply assigned to the first-named of the ethnic identities they have selected.

Working from the basis of shared membership of a readily identifiable population sub-group can also shade over all too easily into what Masters (2011) has recently called the '"soft bigotry" of low expectations'. Ethnically-based reporting of educational outcomes can give rise to an inadvertent slide from observing a correlation to detecting an apparent explanation. As Masters puts it, 'a preoccupation with demographic distinctions may serve only to… cement future expectations', on the part of both teachers and students, at a damagingly low level.

But a further concern about the almost exclusively ethnic approach to defining and managing inclusion is that it may end up excluding many potential students whose prior educational disadvantage results from class and poverty, whatever their ethnicity. The New Zealand Ministry of Education gathers data from the census to calculate a particular school's position on a scale of deciles. A school provides student addresses

and these are used to determine which areas students come from. From this data, each school is assigned a decile rating based on a number of factors relating to social disadvantage: household income, occupation, household crowding, educational qualifications, and income support. Decile 1 schools are deemed to comprise students from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds, while decile 10 schools comprise students from relatively advantaged backgrounds.

School deciles are built from consistent, objective and auditable data from the census. Nevertheless, the distribution of high and low decile schools and the method by which they are calculated have some limitations: for example, it is difficult for large schools to find themselves in the lowest decile because their larger catchments tend to be more diverse. Nor does the decile rating of a school necessarily indicate clearly the socio-economic status of any individual student or their family. Nevertheless, the decile rating of the schools that students attended prior to their admission into a university provides the best proxy that is currently available for the social composition of a university's undergraduate student intake.

Strathdee (2011) reviewed the data for all 58,186 students who left a New Zealand secondary school in any year from 2005 to 2009 inclusive, obtained the University Entrance standard, and enrolled at any local university. Averaging the intakes for all eight New Zealand universities across this period revealed that just over 25 per cent of all first-year students at university were drawn from decile 10 schools, while only just over one per cent came from decile 1 schools. The gap has closed only very slightly over the five years considered in the study.

It might be asked whether such a close correlation exists between attending a low decile school and Māori or Pacific ethnicity that strategies designed to lift the achievement of students in the groups targeted for priority in the Tertiary Education Strategy would also be strategies designed to lift the achievement of students from poorer backgrounds. Here, Strathdee's analysis shows that any such assumption would be unjustified. For example, Victoria University of Wellington draws slightly more of its Pasifika first-years and significantly more of its Māori first-years from high decile schools than from low decile schools. In decile one schools, Māori and Pasifika students are in the majority, but the proportion of European students in a school increases substantially with every increase in decile. Attracting more Māori and Pacific students from decile 2, 3 or 4 schools will help to lift the participation of students from poorer backgrounds. However, if attracting more Māori and Pacific students remains the primary focus of policy and of interventions, the advancement of the majority of students from poorer backgrounds (those of European ethnicity) will remain at best a secondary concern.

Citing OECD research, the TEC reports that the primary underlying factor having an impact on access to tertiary education is socio-economic status, which has a greater impact than any other personal characteristic including age, gender and ethnicity (Tertiary Education Commission 2010a, p.15). In New Zealand, as well as internationally, populations with low socio-economic status often have the lowest levels of participation and access to tertiary education. TEC figures show that, in 2010, students from schools in deciles 9 and 10 were three times more likely to leave school having achieved the University Entrance standard than students from schools in deciles 1 and 2 (Tertiary Education Commission 2010b).

In addition, the TEC's Auckland Study (Tertiary Education Commission 2010a), on the education needs of school-leavers in the Auckland region, found that students from low socio-economic communities were more likely to enrol at whatever tertiary educational provider happened to be locally available than were their counterparts in less disadvantaged communities. While access to sufficient funds can give students the opportunity to reach provision elsewhere, socio-economic factors impinge on the ability of students from low decile schools to travel to, and hence have access to, the wider provision that is available to those from the high decile schools. This limits their choices and may lead to enrolment in lower level or inappropriate qualifications simply on the basis of geographical proximity. Even when students from low socio-economic backgrounds manage to attend the institution of their choice, the cost and time of travel may limit their ability to participate fully in the extra-curricular and social aspects of the student experience.

The other important factors identified in the Auckland Study as influencing the lower participation rates of low socio-economic students were community and family attitudes towards the relevance and advantages of

tertiary education, and a lack of role models. These factors of course reflect the lower likelihood that members of the student's immediate community have themselves been awarded tertiary qualifications, and so may threaten a continuing cycle of relative exclusion.

There is, then, good reason to think that adding to the current ethnically-focused policy framework a stronger socio-economic dimension would valuably extend the policy debate and framework for the tertiary sector in New Zealand. After all, among the targeted policy directions identified by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2008, p.18, Table 2e) as important to achieve equity in tertiary education are to:

- Assess extent and origin of equity issues…

- Strengthen the integration of planning between secondary and tertiary education systems…

- Consider positive discrimination policies for particular groups whose prior educational disadvantage is well identified… [and]

- Provide incentives for T[ertiary] E[ducation] I[nstitution]s to widen participation and to provide extra support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Much good work has been done in New Zealand on step 1; that is, on identifying, analysing and addressing some of the ethnically-related factors affecting rates of tertiary participation and success. It would be a significant step forward to look at the interaction and divergence of these factors with those originating in class. At the same time, as Devlin (2011) has recently argued, there is likely also to be benefit in the Australian system in extending the transformative potential of the idea of cultural 'inclusiveness' in teaching and curriculum into the domain of socio-economic status.

The third (and final) part of this paper is concerned with the issue of determining what kinds of service supports and initiatives within a particular university are most likely to be effective. In New Zealand's current capped funding environment, this is likely to become an ever more pressing question. But even in an expanding funding context, it is a question that must be addressed. There is no virtue in developing or maintaining support that is ineffective, inappropriately targeted or unsustainably expensive.

In his history of student counselling in New Zealand, Brailsford (2011) cites the report of the first such counsellor, Lorna McLay, on her activities in 1967. She analysed the issues with which students presented themselves to her into nine categories: study problems; vocational choice; personality problems; major psychological disturbance; depression; adjustment to university life; sex difficulties (including pregnancy); financial assistance; and accommodation. With some adjustment for contemporary terminologies – such as'careers guidance' for 'vocational choice', for instance – McLay's categorisation lays the groundwork for what has been the configuration of core student services in New Zealand ever since. How do they correspond to what we know about inclusion?

There has been a good deal of international research on the predictors of tertiary study adjustment, success and retention. A rich field of research of particular potential relevance for Australia and New Zealand has been the experience and achievement of minority and migrant students in the US. The number of, and relative weighting ascribed to, such predictors varies from study to study, as might be expected. Nevertheless, a commonality of approach can quite often be detected, and that is to propose a tripartite framework that distinguishes between particular kinds of factors. In planning a service response to the inclusion agenda, there could well be value in adopting a framework such as the one proposed by Newman and Newman (1999). In their analysis, retention and success through to the point of degree completion result from the interaction among three sets of factors. The summary that follows paraphrases their work into a more recognisably Australian and New Zealand academic context and terminology.

The first set of factors Newman and Newman identify are those that precede enrolment, such as the educational background of parents, family and community goals and values, prior achievement at school, and attending a school oriented towards academic achievement. Their second set of factors are those that relate to the tertiary institution a student attends, including the availability of scholarships or other financial

aid, student orientation, the ability to enrol in the preferred programme and courses, and access to mentoring and course advice. The final set of factors, for Newman and Newman, are those that relate to a student's personal development; included here are such attributes as an ability to manage time and competing demands, feelings of alienation from or belonging to the institution, and the willingness to seek out and secure academic and social support.

In a study of the experience of Pasifika students at the Victoria University of Wellington, Toumu'a (2011) has built on work of this kind to devise a framework of what she terms 'Institutional', 'Personal' and 'External' factors, sub-divided in each case into those that are 'facilitating' of retention and success and those that are 'inhibiting'. Institutional factors include campus infrastructure and population size and participation in pre-university outreach activities and programmes, as well as some indicators of engagement through teaching and learning, use of the library, and engagement with student services. Personal factors Toumu'a considered include reasons for being at university, attitudes and habits of mind that foster or hinder persistence and success, the student's self-perceived possession or lack of skills needed for success, and actions taken to address problems and foster success. External factors include financial resources, accommodation and travel, personal relationships, and parental and community expectations.

Analytic frameworks of this kind are useful primarily because they can help to distinguish conceptually between those contributors to retention and success that a university can set out to affect directly and those that certainly need to be understood but which universities can only hope to influence. Clearly, such pre-enrolment or personal factors as parental values or habits of mind do not develop independently of broader institutional and social factors, but there may well be comparatively little a student services group can do about them other than understand how they have helped to shape the person with whom they are dealing. A personal commitment to historic redress or to social justice easily produces a slide into a sense that student services have an obligation to deal with disadvantage of any kind at every level. But, given the wide range of responsibilities that fall to universities and the effect of limitations on available resources, it is institutional goals and values that must set the expectations. After all, most – perhaps all – universities articulate a commitment to equity and social justice among their institutional values, but that does not mean that they necessarily share the same priorities in putting those values into effect.

Universities have frameworks for inclusion and equity for a range of reasons and at differing levels of financial and other commitment. The strongest framework is one which is driven by public policy, which is likely to generate: national or sectoral plans and targets for participation and/or success; institutional incentives, rewards or penalties through such mechanisms as specific lines of funding, funding premiums, or performance-based funding; and compliance monitoring along with 'name and shame' tactics of public reporting. The second sort of framework is driven by specific institutional goals and values such as diversity. This level of commitment is likely to be manifest in branding and institutional self-image; in institutional plans and targets; in internal monitoring and benchmarking; in the development of leadership positions associated with groups identified as priorities or with an institutional agenda of inclusion; and in individual incentives and rewards such as scholarships and prizes. The lowest level of engagement can probably best be described as reactive to social changes that can no longer be ignored. It is likely to be characterised by reliance on rhetorical drivers of exhortation and reproach, by a focus on the removal of obstacles and specific barriers, by monitoring through simple statistical reporting, and by tactics such as 'star spotting' of successful individuals from underrepresented groups or re-setting of definitions and measures of success. Each university must understand its own place in these multiple possible frameworks.

Within the complex and intersecting frameworks established by factors that influence the likelihood of individual success and by the depth of sectoral or institutional response to those factors, it is necessary for universities to find ways of identifying and targeting priorities that will effectively advance the work of inclusion. Assessing and evaluating the current range, mix and level of continuing services is important, but so is the task of adjudicating between the many good ideas for new or additional support activities that might be undertaken. With limited capacity to invest in pilots, trials, one-off projects or service improvement initiatives, it is necessary to identify ways of determining what has the greatest potential to make a difference.

In my own approach, I try to work through a structured series of questions:

1. What is the problem or issue a proposed initiative is designed to address? Whether it is perceived as a problem, an issue or an opportunity will depend to some degree on the models of inclusion and of disadvantage operative within the particular institution (deficit or diversity, for example).

2. Is this issue one which is appropriately addressed at university level, and can a university reasonably hope to address it to any significant extent? This is where most helpful to distinguish between institutional, personal and external factors; where a university has the ability to provide, co-ordinate or organise the proposed response, the likelihood of making a difference is significantly greater than where they can at best only lobby, advise or influence. So, for example, the second of the four OECD policy directions for equity in education cited above – 'Strengthen the integration of planning between secondary and tertiary education systems' – is the most underdeveloped in many national educational systems. It is likely that much more could be achieved in terms of inclusion and equity by focusing on developing some clear pathways and smooth transitions rather than seeking to address all kinds and degrees of disadvantage separately within each sector and every individual institution. But no individual or group within student services can exert any serious degree of control over such integration, and it is likely to be more effective to focus in the professional context on what is under direct university control: everything from strategic goals or promotions criteria, through teaching and assessment styles, to the specifics of campus feel, computer access and space allocation.

3. Is the scale sufficient to warrant an organised initiative? Given the multitude of candidate groups for equity group status arising from different forms of self-identification, it is essential to be able to give some account of the specific educational disadvantage and the size of the identified priority groups. Otherwise, it may be impossible to provide adequate resources for activities to support any of them.

4. What capacity is there to measure progress and to make some link between the intervention and that progress? This is always complex and sometimes baffling, but it is hard to provide convincing evidence of a need to continue with an initiative or activity without at least a partial response to this question.

5. Can the proposer of the initiative demonstrate a clear link to institutional goals, values and/or targets?

Only if there is an institutionally satisfactory response to each of these questions do I consider proceeding with a new response or a targeted initiative. In other words, a focus on the institutional factors will help to identify specific areas where service responses can make a difference.

In the end, if universities are to do better than we have done so far in supporting students from diverse demographic and socio-economic backgrounds for participation and success, it will not be achieved by leaving untouched the core academic business and relying on service supports to bridge the gap. Multiple factors will need to be addressed in multiple ways.

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Rachel's Story: A Bridge to Inclusion

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Abstract

This is Rachel's story, a case study about fostering and promoting support amongst staff with intellectual disabilities in universities and other post-secondary institutions. The University of Sydney actively supports and mentors the employment and professional development of an employee with intellectual disability. For sixteen years, Rachel has been employed as a Jobsupport nominee, maintaining open employment for award wages. Rachel's experience provides a role model for others with a disability, and demonstrates how we can realise the benefits to both people and business of the placement into quality jobs in the regular workforce of people with disabilities.

The ways that Rachel and her supporters have experienced their world opens a methodological door to the use of narrative to capture the personal and human dimensions of achieving equity at work for people with disabilities.

People with a significant intellectual disability perform well in routine jobs, if the right preparations are made. Rachel's story demonstrates the Jobsupport methodology of initial assessment to achieve the best possible job match, a detailed analysis of the work site followed by job design to ensure that the placement works well for both the employer and the client, and ongoing training and supervision that includes specialised assistance from Jobsupport to remove any above normal supervision requirements for the employer.

Rachel's story presents a case study of achieving equity in practice, and demonstrates the conceptual frame for using the Jobsupport methodology to place, train and maintain people with a significant intellectual disability into quality jobs in the regular workforce that meet both their employment needs and the needs of the employer. It also presents an opportunity for practitioners to reflect on who is included in the staffing of higher education, and our commitment in striving to promote an inclusive community for people with disabilities.

Introduction

Humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p.2)

The ways that Rachel, her family, Jobsupport Open Employment service professionals (Jobsupport, 2011) and co-workers have experienced Rachel's world opens a methodological door to the use of narrative inquiry to 'capture personal and human dimensions that cannot be quantified into dry facts and numerical data' (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004, p.1).

Kemmis (2000) aims to illustrate this through a symposium or combination of the different interpretations of what constitutes practice in the various traditions used to describe and study an issue, and the purposes for which that study is undertaken. It is an approach similar to that of Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000, pp.44-45) who describe methodology as 'not the products of scientific enquiry but the process itself' that is used to describe and analyse the range of approaches used to gather, interpret and explain data, and to then suggest new formulations, provided always (Cohen, et al., 2000, p.1), that such methodology 'fits the purpose' of the enquiry.

Gergen and Gergen (1988) attribute the use of narrative as a means by which we make ourselves intelligible within the social world and make accessible information on which to base subsequent social actions (Ochs &

Schieffelin, 1989). Narrative is a practice 'as critical of the way it describes its objects of study as it is about the way it explains their structures and processes' (White, 1984, p.1). From this, suggests Riessman (1993), arises a network of relationships that influence the ideas that can make sense of events and actions in people's lives and 'create a plot from disordered experience' (Riessman, 1993, p.4) to aid interpretation (Bruner, 1990, p.51) by others. The use of narrative as methodology is summarised by Cronin (1992, p.1376) who posits that 'the stories we tell, like the questions we ask, are all finally about value'.

Perspective

> *Employment opportunities for people with a significant intellectual disability have come a long way over the last 20 years.(Tuckerman, in Clark, 2008)*

> *Employment is a right of citizenship and a social determinant of health, but employment rates remain low for persons with disabilities. (Kirsh, et al., 2009, p.391)*

> *Attitudes about the role that people with disabilities can play in the labour market and society are changing. (J. Brown, 2011, p.vi)*

In considering the effectiveness of services for adults with intellectual disabilities, Hemmings and colleagues (2009) note the need for support to be focused on the service user. In the case of employment, the approach of open employment[1] can facilitate and promote participation and integration of people with an intellectual disability (Cramm, Finkenflügel, Kuijsten, & van Exel, 2009). Appropriate support has also been identified as a major contributor to quality of life for people with an intellectual disability (R. I. Brown & Brown, 2005; Lippold & Burns, 2009).

Whilst being physically integrated and engaged in a wide range of activities 'does not guarantee good social and emotional support' (Lippold & Burns, 2009, p.463), the impact of supported work as both 'participation' and 'structure' (Cramm, et al., 2009, p.519) contributes to self-development and has a positive effect on well-being (Kober & Eggleton, 2005). In order to facilitate work integration Kirsch and colleagues (2009) note that the person, the job and the work environment need to be matched, and that the open employment model provides an effective framework for work integration for people with intellectual disabilities. This approach is also supported by Pernice (Fillary & Pernice, 2006; Pernice, 2005), who observes that success of the open employment model increases in the presence of a strong workplace culture, a supportive person and workplace environment match, and the provision of effective support on the job.

The benefits derived from open employment include better economic and social outcomes than in non-integrated work settings (Jenaro, Mank, Bottomley, Doose, & Tuckerman, 2002). An open employment program for people with intellectual disability has also been demonstrated to be a cost effective option for government and almost revenue neutral per client when compared to the pension after 12 months. Over time (report Tuckerman, Smith, & Borland, 1999), this result has been relatively robust.

Based on the supported competitive employment programs developed in the United States, particularly at the University of Washington (Rusch, 1986), Jobsupport (Tuckerman & Green, 2008) was established in 1986 when the then Federal Minister Don Grimes introduced the Disability Services Act recognising that people with disabilities have the same rights as other members of society to services and the least restrictive alternative (Tuckerman, 2002). The Jobsupport mission is to 'place, train and maintain as many people with a significant intellectual disability as possible into quality jobs in the regular workforce that meet both their employment needs and the needs of the employer' (Jobsupport, 2011). Best practice is evidenced in the Jobsupport program, including matching the person to the job, providing positive relationships with employers and co-workers, flexible and individually designed support, commitment to the individual, and on-site job training (Racino, 1985).

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[1] It is useful to clarify terminology. In the US, the term 'supported employment' equates to what we call 'open employment' in Australia. In Australia, the term 'supported employment' is often used to refer to employment in an Australian Disability Enterprise, previously termed 'sheltered workshops'. In this paper, we use the term 'open employment'

Rachel – a voice for equity

>*Rachel is eventful. (Gerry)*

In this section, we give voice to Rachel, her co-workers, supporters and family. The intent is to illustrate through practice the theoretical underpinnings of open employment. The lived experience of Rachel and the others with whom she works provides an interpretive view of the issues impacting the full employment of people with an intellectual disability. Rachel's story also illustrates how our interaction at work has brought deeper meaning and enrichment to us all. To once again cite Gerry, a teacher and colleague, 'Rachel as metaphor' also infers a recommendation that the Jobsupport methodology of open employment merits closer attention and wider application.

Rachel has an intellectual disability, the result of a brain tumour which was diagnosed and surgically removed when she was three years old. Rachel is one of more than 550 people placed by Jobsupport in award or productivity-based jobs throughout Sydney. Tuckerman (2002) recalls that Jobsupport began as a demonstration project 25 years ago to examine whether open employment was possible in Australia for people with a significant intellectual disability.

For more than 16 years Rachel has been employed as General Assistant, a Higher Education Officer Level 2 role at CET, the English language teaching arm of the University of Sydney (The University of Sydney, 2011b), an institution founded on principles of diversity and equity (The University of Sydney, 2011b).

>*The long term success of open employment for people like Rachel and employers like the University of Sydney have inspired others and today open employment is the norm for this group of Sydney school leavers. (Phil Tuckerman, Jobsupport)*

In CET, Jobsupport's follow-up service is focussed on Rachel and her illness (Hemmings, et al., 2009). Sarra, Rachel's Jobsupport Maintenance Officer monitors Rachel's performance to ensure standards are maintained, and provides additional training at no cost to help Rachel adapt to workplace changes (Jobsupport, 2011).

>*Rachel has been a client of Jobsupport since she graduated from a special school in 1992. Jobsupport have placed Rachel in two permanent full time award based office administration positions over the last 20 years. (Sarra)*

One of the reasons Rachel enjoys her work at the University is that she is continuing a family tradition of working in education. For many years her mother was a Dean in another university in Sydney, and her father was a senior executive staff member in a leading independent school.

Rachel's story typifies the personal, social and financial benefits of full-time open employment identified by Jenaro and colleagues (2002). Reflecting on Tuckerman and colleagues (1999), Rachel's parents observe of the experience that it has been both:

>*A pleasure and a privilege to observe Jobsupport staff working with our daughter. The design of individual training and maintenance programs for her, the record keeping, and program evaluation has been first class. Communication with us and support of us as parents has been outstanding. For example, in 2006 Rachel experienced some significant medical difficulties that necessitated a substantial period of leave from her job. Jobsupport worked with and educated management and co-workers at the university to facilitate Rachel's successful return to duty.*

>*Over the past twenty years Jobsupport staff have ensured that Rachel's self confidence and self esteem are fostered through supporting her in two extremely satisfying jobs that have significantly contributed to her quality of life and financial independence. Rachel now earns in excess of $50,000 per annum, an income that would not have been possible without the assistance of Jobsupport. For example, Rachel and her husband, who also has an intellectual disability, have managed to purchase their own home unit partly because they both have retained long term award based employment. (Rachel's mother, Judith)*

Patrick Pheasant is CET Director. He describes Rachel as:

CET's bellwether. When Rachel walks in and smiles, we know it's going to be a good day. She has stabilised us as a team and as individuals she has broadened our horizons by increasing our understanding of the full spectrum of people in our society. (Patrick)

Rachel's life at work is thus both 'participation' and 'structure' (Hemmings, et al., 2009), with Sarra monitoring the placement and advocating for her in the workplace (Jobsupport, 2011; Kirsh, et al., 2009). Sarra is also available to visit at more frequent intervals and at short notice if required by Rachel or CET.

We believe that Jobsupport interventions at critical periods over the last 16 years have ensured Rachel's continued and successful employment at the University of Sydney. (CET Deputy Director Dan Bruce)

In CET, Rachel prepares course and student orientation materials, and assists with various other office duties such as photocopying, which is essential to the smooth functioning of the centre. Of her role in CET, Rachel says simply:

I like everything about my job and I like the people. (Rachel)

Co-workers' feelings toward Rachel are reciprocal. Their observations amplify the findings of Cramm and colleagues (2009) that open employment promotes participation and integration. Teacher Mark observes that:

At CET we cater to a culturally diverse international student clientele. With Rachel we learn that diversity is truly wider than simply cultural difference. To celebrate diversity is to accept multiple differences. (Mark)

To Asher, another teacher, Rachel is 'a treasured co-worker. Her value to the organisational culture is immense. I perceive her as a vital, engaged, evolving person with a deep love for others and a raucous laugh that has lightened many a moment'.

Rachel loves her work so much she is seldom absent. Rachel is an integral part of the CET team, and on the rare occasion she is not here she is sorely missed as she is the only one who can take a photocopier apart and reconstruct it minus the glitch. (Kaye)

Luke, also a teacher, describes Rachel as 'a much valued and integral part of our teaching and administrative teams because of, not in spite of, her disability'. 'Staff value her contributions at CET' observes another teacher, Yi Tzing. She is seen as:

One of us. Rachel feels important and values her own contribution. Rachel takes her work seriously – photocopying, mailing, cleaning the fridge, and collecting money for the milk float. (Yi Tzing)

The social and emotional aspects of Rachel's experience in open employment (R. I. Brown & Brown, 2005; Lippold & Burns, 2009) is best typified by Janelle, the CET Marketing Officer:

I love hearing Rachel stories. Quick with a mischievous laugh and cheeky smile, Rachel's stories are full of a richness that only certain people can do. (Janelle)

Kaye further reflects:

I have worked with Rachel for 15 years. She is often my lunch buddy; she enjoys a good chat and often has excellent advice to offer. She would tell me of her many triumphs on the bowling team and at martial arts. Recently she told me how she used these skills to foil an attempt to steal her bag at Hornsby station. (Kaye)

Another teacher, Maria, recalls the "Darth Vader" anecdote whilst Rachel was on excursion with CET students to the Powerhouse Museum of Science and Design:

Rachel got wind of the end of course excursion and as it was to the Powerhouse, I asked her if she would like to join the group. The general ticket was $5 admission for students, but the special Star Wars exhibit was another $5 and beyond our budget.

We began our way around the Powerhouse. As we got close to the ramp leading to the Star Wars exhibition, Rachel heard the movie's sound track. A Darth Vader character was guarding the entry. Well, Rachel was off. "Darth Vader" she muttered and hurled herself up the ramp. The ticket person was in no position to interpose. No ticket, no extra $5, just Rachel hurling herself into the exhibition. I was a bit concerned she would get lost. "I'm with her" I explained to the ticket person. Rachel was in there somewhere. By the time I found Rachel all the class were in there. I guess we all "were with" the indomitable Rachel who more than made up for the entry fees with her shopping in the Star Wars Franchise shop! (Maria)

At work, Rachel has proven an extremely loyal friend, 'attending the funerals of colleagues and inviting us all to her engagement party, Hen's night, wedding, and even over to her parents' place for a weekend BBQ which was attended by all staff en masse' (Kaye). Rachel also takes great pleasure in organising special events at CET, such as Melbourne cup office sweeps and other celebrations. Kaye continues:

At Christmas, Rachel recruits a Santa Claus from the more portly staff members and comes wearing her Christmas elf suit complete with flashing earrings. She goes around to all the classes handing out sweets. It is Rachel who insists on Xmas decorations in the office, and takes charge of decorating the school. At Easter, she hands out Easter eggs to staff and students that she has paid for herself. When a member of staff has been gone for a while Rachel welcomes them back with a big hug. She is unfailing cheerful, positive and extremely loyal. (Kaye)

Social inclusion for Rachel extends beyond work, and she often shares anecdotes of this life with her work friends. Saturday for Rachel is Hapkido (A.H.A., 2011), an eclectic Korean martial art in which Rachel has attained Black Belt status. Next year, Rachel will participate in a world championship competition in this sport. On Sunday, its karate, or attending husband Mark's cricket matches:

But that gets in the road of shopping. Mark hates shopping, but I love it. (Rachel)

Life beyond work can be quite an adventure for Rachel, and CET becomes involved in the storytelling. Rachel's journey home one evening was impacted by train delays associated with a severe local storm. Her train could not continue beyond a particular station, so Rachel and her 'train friends' as she terms the people she meets most evenings on the way home from work went into a local bistro for a meal. Judith continues:

We drove to Strathfield and collected her and one of her train friends, John who uses a wheelchair. We met her train friends Craig, Sonya and John for the first time. They seemed very nice, helpful and supportive of Rachel. I thanked Craig for including Rachel in the group as they all coped with the massive delays and he responded "No problems. Rachel is a legend. We all helped each other". It was nice to meet the people she says she talks to most evenings on the way home. (Judith)

Next day, teacher Marcella recalls:

Rachel came and sat next to me and said those very 'Rachel' words, "Hey, guess what?" and told me her latest bit of news. This of course was not the first time she's come up for a bit of a natter – with me and with the other staff here. She loves having us to share her news with. We love listening to her and it's obvious that she feels relaxed with us and confident in being just one of us. To me, that's Rachel. (Marcella)

Like others with an intellectual disability, using information technology in work has presented a challenge for Rachel (Li-Tsang, Yeung, & Chan, 2005). Acknowledging these difficulties, the general perception is that with sufficient training and support, Rachel could also meaningfully join the world of IT at work. The university's specialist Assistive Technology consultation and support service (The University of Sydney, 2011a) is working with CET and Jobsupport to identify and provide suitable technologies and training for

Rachel. Success in this domain would open the way to further job enrichment and possible promotion. Rachel is looking forward to this new challenge, and characteristically observes:

Right on! (Rachel)

Reflecting on the observations of Fillary and Pernice (Fillary & Pernice, 2006; Pernice, 2005), the 'value' (Cronon, 1992) in Rachel's story, her life and social engagement at work and beyond is perhaps best summed up by Patrick, who observes that 'somehow, looking after the more vulnerable amongst us makes us all better'. To Patricia, a visiting invigilator, it is simply a case of:

Disability; what disability? (Patricia)

Conclusion

This then is Rachel's story. It's a 'small story' of support and commitment (Racino, 1985), as it came to be known whilst it was being prepared, and it is our interpretation of what Rachel and others have said during interviews for this case study. The findings are our attempt to craft what Rachel's mother Judith has described as 'one story, one message, from the many voices and pieces' of one person's lived experience that we have been privileged to experience during our time with Rachel (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Gergen & Gergen, 1988; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1989; Riessman, 1993). The voices and names in Rachel's story are real, and used with permission; any errors or omissions in interpretation are the authors' alone. Whilst the findings in this report may not demonstrate the academic robustness of other papers presented at this ANZSSA conference, Rachel's story is a voice for equity and inclusion. It offers an opportunity to celebrate success in achieving equity and diversity in practice for people with an intellectual disability. The last word on the positive effects (Kober & Eggleton, 2005) of Rachel's 'eventful' story, however, must well and truly be Rachel's:

Whatever!

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Engaging Students across Distance and Place:

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From a paper presented at the Measuring and Improving Student Engagement and Experience Conference, 22-23 November, 2011, Melbourne.

Abstract

There is a wealth of both anecdotal and sound research evidence which demonstrates a clear link between a student's engagement with their learning community and their academic outcomes. Having a sense of connection and engagement with the institution, through their contact with lecturers, fellow students, other university staff, can make all the difference between persistence and academic success; and disillusionment, disappointment and abandonment of studies. With the expansion of on-line studies an additional challenge for all of us working with tertiary students, is to develop a better understanding of the needs of those who are studying solely in an on-line environment. We need to learn more about ways in which we can successfully engage and support students whom we may never meet face-to-face. This paper discusses some of those challenges for the Student Experience Unit at Open Universities Australia and the strategies being developed in order to meet them.

Introduction

The topic of student engagement and experience is one that has been dear to my heart for many years. I have worked for the past 18 years providing support services to students in the higher education environment, for many years at the University of Newcastle in NSW, and now in my role as Director of the Student Experience Unit at Open Universities Australia. It has been my close contact with students in different settings, from many diverse backgrounds and of all ages which has constantly reminded me of the importance of students feeling a sense of belonging and connection with the learning community. Hand in hand with this goes the need for appropriately targeted and effective support – both academic and personal, to ensure that every student has the opportunity to reach their potential (Stone, 2000, 2004, 2008). How we can achieve this effectively in an on-line environment is a new challenge for me and I suspect for many others, as universities and other tertiary institutions move increasingly to on-line delivery.

Open Universities Australia

Open Universities Australia (OUA), which began as 'Open Learning' in Australia in 1993, is now the national leader in online higher education, with over 144,000 students having studied with it since it started operating. It is a company that is owned by seven Australian Universities, providing over 1400 units of study, and more than 170 qualifications from over 20 Australian Universities and other higher education providers. The list of providers and qualifications offered is growing each year, including those from the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector.

OUA offers courses and units delivered on-line by its educational partners and affiliates. These include enabling and bridging courses, VET courses, undergraduate degrees and postgraduate qualifications. Qualifications are awarded by the particular university or tertiary institution which has provided the course of study, and these qualifications are identical to those awarded to on-campus students.

On-line delivery removes many of the traditional barriers to higher education. Entry to nearly all units of study is open to all, requiring no pre-requisite qualifications. Students can choose to study a range of individual units, which may be based purely on interest, or can select those which will enable them to work

towards a full degree program. Entry to a degree program can be achieved via the credit gained from units successfully completed. Some students also use OUA studies as a way to fast-track their qualifications. With four OUA study periods each year, students can gain extra credit by taking OUA units during the normal university vacation period.

OUA students can also apply for Fee Help, the Commonwealth scheme which allows deferred payment of fees in the same way as HECS (Higher Education Contribution Scheme), so that no money has to be paid up-front. Over 70% of OUA students use Fee Help to fund their studies. They can choose from a wide range of units and courses, including Arts & Humanities, Business, Education, Health, Information Technology, Law & Justice studies, Science & Engineering.

Who are OUA students?

OUA students come from all walks of life, including school leavers, mature workers, full-time parents and those who are unemployed.

Approximately 60% of OUA students are female and more than half of all OUA students are aged over 21 – therefore 'mature-age' by definition. The majority of students come from NSW, Victoria and Queensland, but every other state and territory is represented as well. Nearly 78% of students live in major Australian cities with most speaking English as their first language. Over 80% nominate professional development as their primary motive for studying. Nearly 70% are employed full time or part time, while around one in ten are in full-time home duties and a similar number is seeking work. Just under half come from families where neither parent has a university qualification and around a quarter are from the lower five deciles for socio-economic status as determined by postcode. Similar to the statistics in the higher education sector in general, around 5% of students identify as having a disability.

The statistics above indicate that OUA students can generally be considered 'non-traditional'. Few come straight from school, the majority is mature-aged, a quarter come from the lowest five SES deciles, around 40% are the first in their family to come to university, and they are all able to enter university studies through an open-entry environment. As such, OUA provides an important pathway into higher education for identified equity groups, hence playing a significant role in "widening access to higher education to previously under-represented groups" (Clancy & Goastellec, 2007, p. 137).

Importance of student engagement

So we know that OUA is an important entry point into higher education for many students from diverse backgrounds, and what we also know from other research is that the real challenge is effectively engaging and supporting such students so that they are more likely to stay and succeed. Definitions of student engagement vary slightly, but there is general agreement that it requires the investment and commitment of both the student and the institution, and that there are strategies which institutions can use to enhance engagement.

According to Krause and Coates (2008), "student engagement develops from the dynamic interplay between student and institutional activities and conditions" (p.494).

Vicki Trowler, in her review of the literature on student engagement on behalf of the UK Higher Education Academy, summarises the character of student engagement in the following way:

> *Student engagement is concerned with the interaction between the time, effort and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students and the performance, and reputation of the institution. (Trowler, 2010, p.3).*

Data from the AUSSE (Australasian Survey of Student Engagement; ACER, 2008, 2009, 2010) informs us that amongst students in Australia and New Zealand, engagement with the learning community is closely linked with student satisfaction and success. This is consistent with the findings from the NSSE – the

National Survey of Student Engagement that began in the US – as well as an international body of research, such as that by Kuh and colleagues who find that:

Student engagement in educationally purposeful activities is positively related to academic outcomes (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie and Gonyea, 2008. p.555).

We also know from the results of these surveys that access to and use of support services makes a positive difference. There is a clear correlation between the use of support services and student departure intentions. Those who have seriously contemplated leaving are less likely to have accessed these services (AUSSE Research Briefing, June 2011). Such findings are also consistent with other international research in adult education (e.g. Couvillion-Landry, 2002; Krause, 2005a; McGivney, 2006, Skillbeck, 2006).

To highlight but one of these, Skilbeck's (2006) UK study identifies 'a range of support services' as one of the key factors contributing towards 'good practice' in adult learning.

Value of support mechanisms

Tinto's work in the area of student retention over many years also points to the impact of support on positive academic outcomes.

Support is a condition that promotes student retention. Research points to several types of support that promote retention, in particular academic and social support. (Tinto, 2009).

Forging positive connections with teaching staff and fellow students has also been demonstrated internationally to play a significant role in student satisfaction, persistence and academic success (Coffman & Gilligan, 2002; Quinn, 2005; Skahill, 2002/2003).

According to Skahill (2002/2003) "the most important criterion for staying in college is the student's social support network" (p. 39), while Rendon's (1998) work with mature-age and other non-traditional students in American colleges indicates the importance of "validation, when faculty, students, friends, parents and spouses made an effort to acknowledge these students and what they were trying to achieve" (p. 3).

Kuh et al. (2008) find that there is a "compensatory effect" (p.555) of student engagement for students who are "academically unprepared or first in their families to go to college" (p.555), in that such students, when engaged, perform better academically than expected, in comparison to more advantaged students, as well as demonstrating persistence through improved retention.

Mature-age student experience

In my own research with mature-age students (Stone, 2008) who are the first in their families to come to university (who, as we have seen, form a significant cohort within OUA), establishing positive connections with others, such as lecturers, friends and fellow students, library staff, and others on campus including those working in the cafeteria and the bookshops, played a major role in their determination to persist with their studies despite the many pressures of time, money and family issues.

Another important factor was the presence and use of free, well-resourced and easily accessible support services.

Adequate access to support services such as counselling, career advice, learning support and other services can be essential to both participation and success (O'Shea & Stone, 2011, p.3).

Challenges for engagement

But how do teaching staff and support staff connect with students in a meaningful way when we never see them face-to-face? And how do we help students to connect with each other when they never come together as a group? And to complicate matters even further, how do we successfully help them to feel connected to and part of a learning community, when they are often studying across two or more different institutions?

We know that 'student and staff interactions are one of the most important characteristics of high quality learning' (ACER, 2008), particularly for non-traditional students, and that initiatives such as student mentor

programs are recognised nationally and internationally as contributing significantly to student satisfaction and retention (Dearlove, Farrell, Handa, & Pastore, 2007; Erskine, 2000; Krause, 2005b; McInnes, James & Hartley, 2000; Stone, 2000).

So, how can we make this work in an on-line environment and make sure that students feel adequately connected with staff and other students?

Engagement – Whose responsibility?

Another important question to be asked in the OUA environment is who is responsible for student engagement? Is it OUA? Is it the universities and other educational institutions which are providing the units and courses? And is it the teaching staff or the support services within these institutions?

The obvious, yet not so simple answer is that all of us are responsible. Students need to feel connected with the academic institution within which they are studying, as well as with OUA which is facilitating their learning journey. So it is worth spending some time now in looking at the ways in which both OUA and the Provider institutions contribute in different ways to student engagement.

OUA Engagement & Support

OUA has a number of channels through which it aims to develop a sense of connection with students, and in which to assist and support students. The first port of call for most OUA students is a Student Advisor, who offers telephone advice and assistance with enrolment and administrative issues, and also answering questions or referring the student to other avenues of assistance.

OUA also offers some direct teaching to students through its Enabling Units, which are aimed at assisting new students to develop academic skills appropriate to university level study. A number of academic resources to assist and support students are also offered, including on-line 'quick skills' modules and an externally provided tutorial support system called Smarthinking.

The Smarthinking tutorial support service is a US based service that provides access to online tutoring on a 24 hour per day, 7 day per week basis. Through this portal, students can use the Online Writing Lab, where they can submit a draft of assignments for feedback and advice, and also submit questions to tutors who will respond within 24 hours. They can also schedule a 'live chat' session with a tutor.

In terms of personal counselling and career services services for students, currently two different services are available, one being a 24/7 telephone counselling service, contracted through Crisis Support Services in Melbourne, and the other being an online career guidance and information web-site developed for OUA by Insala in the US.

Student Experience Unit

OUA established the Student Experience Unit to bring together what is already in place within OUA to support students, and also to develop other mechanisms and interventions to further engage and connect with students. A recent initiative that are has been developed is an "Online Readiness" self-assessment tool, to assist prospective students to understand what is required for on-line study and how to prepare themselves for this. In conjunction with this is an online Career Advisor tool, to help prospective students decide what they would like to study, depending on the career path they may wish to pursue.

A first-year and specifically 'first-unit' experience strategy is being developed, which will include an online orientation program; and plans are in place for the development of a "Student Success Hub" through which students can assess their particular needs, receive online and telephone advice and mentoring as well as referral to appropriate specialist support services, both academic and personal. The Student Success Hub also includes a system of telephone and email outreach to at-risk groups.

A *Student Engagement & Retention Strategy* is being developed to introduce a coordinated approach to improving student engagement, student satisfaction and retention. Included in this strategy will be a student engagement framework, which will offer a schedule of engagement activities throughout each study period,

through a staged approach. Through this framework, it is intended that a more personal connection be established between students and OUA staff, as well as between students themselves.

Students who consider beginning their learning journey with OUA are at the starting point of a cycle, which continuously repeats itself. At each point of this student engagement cycle, there are possibilities for connecting with and engaging with students in positive ways, through online, telephone and perhaps even some face-to-face contact if and when that is possible.
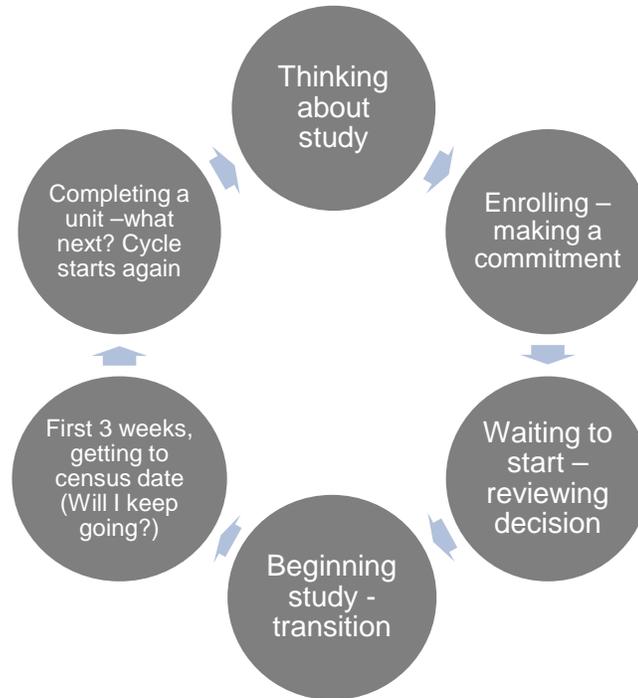

Figure 1: OUA Student Engagement Cycle

Collaboration with Providers

OUA relies on working closely with provider universities and other educational institutions to enhance student engagement. For example, the OUA Engaging Learners in Online Discussion (ELOD) professional development program assists tutors, lecturers, course coordinators to maximise effectiveness of their teaching in an online environment; it is designed as an experiential program, where teachers become the students and learn what works and what doesn't. The development of the program was informed by the work of Lynch and Paasuke (2011) who note the importance of 'the role played by online tutors in motivating and engaging students' (p.3).

The Student Experience Unit is also building links between OUA support services and provider services, to develop a coordinated approach to meeting the needs of a diverse range of students across many institutions. With students studying at a number of different institutions, being aware of what is offered to them by each particular institution is crucial to being able to direct students to the most appropriate sources of help and support.

Provider engagement and support

Through the various providers – the universities and other education institutions in which a student is enrolled – the student generally receives the following:

- Initial information
- Curriculum and learning materials
- Disability services

- Access to online library services
- Access to online information & support via web-sites and student portals etc

Many universities in particular are developing more extensive online resources to cater for the growing numbers of students who are spending less time on campus. Such resources are also a valuable way of engaging with students who may be doing at least part of their studies in a distance mode. Of course, they are also particularly valuable for OUA students who are studying completely on-line.

Online Learning need not be a barrier to effective engagement

One of the research briefings from the AUSSE (ACER, August 2008) indicates that online learners are not necessarily less engaged with their learning and their institution than the on-campus students. Many would argue that it is the development of an identity as a student, and a sense of belonging to the learning community, which are the prerequisites for student engagement (Jackson, 2003; Kuh et al., 2005; Krause & Coates, 2008). This development can be encouraged and facilitated whether the student is studying on-line or face-to-face. However, the challenge in achieving this is arguably greater with on-line students, and this challenge is further increased for 'non-traditional' students, such as first-generational students and students from low SES backgrounds, who may be more likely to experience higher educational culture as alienating. For instance, Mann (2001) likens the experience of non-traditional students to that of being "a stranger in a foreign land" (p. 11).

Conclusion

It is the responsibility of all of us involved in the education of on-line learners to ensure we have the means in place to encourage and support online students, to assist them to develop a sense of identity as students, to feel that they belong to the learning community, and to remain engaged and connected with their learning.

In the case of OUA students, this can most effectively be achieved through collaboration. In working together, we can ensure that all possible means are in place, by which students can connect and engage meaningfully with their learning community, through the collaborative and coordinated actions of OUA and its provider institution/s.

Finally, I'd like to leave you with some words from Tinto:

> *Student success does not arise by chance. It is the result of an intentional, structured, and proactive set of strategies that are coherent and systematic in nature and carefully aligned to the same goal (Tinto, 2009, p.10).*

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Gavin's Story: An Indigenous Student
Who Happens to be a Prisoner

Abstract

by Susan Yates, Learning Advisor, Queensland Correctional Services

Working with Indigenous students who are in jail is a specialised area of student services that has attracted little attention, but is immensely worthwhile. The author of the following short story is one of many Indigenous young men incarcerated in a men's jail somewhere in Queensland. He was thrilled when it was suggested that his story be published and has given permission for his real name to be used, as has the prison where he is held. The story was written last year for a creative writing course which Gavin was taking in the bridging program run by the local university's Indigenous centre through in distance education. Tutoring to support his learning was provided by the Federal Government under the Indigenous Tertiary Assistance Scheme (ITAS). In this short story, written as an assignment for his creative writing course, Gavin tells the tale of his life in a heartbreakingly simple way that unfortunately typifies the experience of many Indigenous youth who end up in jail. However, there is hope for young people such as Gavin, because by enrolling in bridging programs which lead straight into TAFE or university study, prisoners are making a decision to turn their lives around. Gavin learned a huge amount from the two writing courses he took last year and was immensely proud when it was suggested his story be published.

A Boy Who Became a Man Before His Time

by Gavin Henry

There was a boy who was a protector for his mother in times of need, although he didn't know much about life. He was always around his mother; she felt like they were growing up together. She had no brothers or sisters, only her baby boy. They went through a lot of things together, both good and bad. They moved from place to place a lot. He lived in Cairns for about seven years; he went to a school called Cairns West. He was a troubled child, but he didn't know that. He was violent towards the other kids. He thought that it was good to be horrible, and that was a result of the things that were taking place at his home. For years to come this would have a big effect on his life.

Once, in Rockhampton, they had no place to stay. As the sun went down they went to a park and snoozed in a toilet. The boy was about nine or ten years old. As they went to sleep he started to cry. His mum looked towards him and held him and said, "Don't worry, my boy, it will be ok", and then he went back to sleep.

As he got older, around the age of 16, he started to move around on his own, so he didn't worry about too much, but he was always thinking about his mother. He started to chrome because he felt that no one cared for him and he had no place in this world. He became a boy who didn't care about living or dying. He chromed a lot, so the community put him in the Juvenile Detention Centre in Brisbane and that was the start of the boy being a criminal. When he got out of jail the community of Woorabinda kicked him out for sniffing and siphoning fuel out of other people's cars, so he moved to Rockhampton and did the same thing. They put him back in jail and he spent about three weeks in jail and got out. When he got out they moved him to Cairns.

Within the first month of being released the boy did the same thing, but this time he was 17 years old, the age to be put in the big jail. He was sentenced to three years in prison. His mum was at the hearing. He didn't know how this jail was run; it was very different from the Juvenile Detention Centre. There were people who hadn't been in a confined space before who were trying to commit suicide. One man tried to hang himself by jumping off a balcony with a sheet tied around his neck, but the sheet wasn't tied up to the railing

properly and it came undone. He fell and fractured his neck and went to the local hospital for several months. When he got out of the hospital the prison authorities put him on suicide watch.

A week after the boy entered the jail, his mother wrote to him and sent him her phone number. He put it on the prison system. It was a weekend when he phoned her. They talked about when he would get out and also about how much she loved him. She started to cry on the phone and he said to her, "Stop crying, it will be ok. I'll come home soon", so they said goodbye for now.

The next morning a big mob of boys had to go to the gym. They were wondering what was going on, they thought an elder had passed away. The young boy went to the officer and asked him, "What's going on?" The officer named the boy's mother and asked, "Are you the son of this person?" He said, "Yes". "I'm sorry to say this, but they just found your mother this morning and she is dead". He replied, "No, no, my mum is not dead, she is too strong!" He wouldn't believe it, so the officer passed him the phone and on the other end was a Cairns police officer. He said, "It is no mistake, we confirmed it". As he heard the officer saying that, he dropped the phone and cried out so loud that the officer didn't know how to handle it. That night the rain came and washed her footprints off the land.

When the young boy got out of jail, he went to his aunt's place and had a drink with his family. You can see that he wasn't the same boy that was put in jail; that night he drank himself almost to death. As he looked at the people who were passing by he felt that he had no place in this world.

His mind was disturbed; as a result, he was put back in jail and this time he wasn't worrying about the outside, he didn't care if he got a long time. It took a week for the rest of his family to get the news. His father phoned up the prison and told the officer to tell his son to come back to Rockhampton Jail so he could bring his little brothers out to see him. Within the next week the boy was back in Rockhampton Jail.

The boy waited for about three and a half years, but he didn't get a visit from his family. His little brother sent his number to him and he was happy that he could talk to his little brother. He was always asking about their father, but his little brother told him that their father was busy most of the time and that he couldn't come out to see him. There were times when he felt that he had no family because every time that he wrote to them they didn't answer back. The boy didn't worry about his father because eventually he realised that his father wasn't there for him and that he had no time for him.

Now he's not thinking about it, he is just doing his time. He will always think about his mother, because he is the only child that his mother had. Now he is doing university so he can make his mother proud.

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Header within body of the text: 12 point **BOLD**

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JANZSSA is published in black and white so use of colour in graphs, diagrams and drawings may mean that the nuanced meaning in the various components of the chart, graph etc lost. Please ensure that the

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http://www.lib.monash.edu.au/tutorials/citing/apa.html

Suitable content for articles submitted for publication in JANZSSA

Articles may include comment and debate on current issues, reports of student services in practice, policy matters, research projects, and reviews of relevant books. The guiding editorial policy is that articles are of interest to student service staff, and are of a high standard.

JANZSSA publishes both refereed and non-referred articles

Authors who wish to submit an item to be published as a refereed article must include a written note to that effect at the time of submission. If an author does not specify for inclusion in the refereed section the editors will consider the article for publication in the non-refereed section.

Refereed Articles

The Research Programmes and Policy Unit, Higher Education Group, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) advise that JANZSSA is recognized by DEEWR for publication of refereed articles. The register of such journals is to be found at

http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher_education/publications_resources/

Non-Refereed Articles

Articles submitted for publication without being peer-refereed will be published at the discretion of the editors.

Best Practice and Strategies to Show Case

JANZSSA is now including in its non refereed section examples of best practice and innovation emerging in Student Services.

Contributions for this section are invited.

Contributions to this section would normally be descriptive and not evaluative.

Length of submissions can vary but the upper word limit will normally be 1500 words. Contributions of longer length may be returned to the author for editing.

See Showcase Best Practice Report Template for further details.

Show Case Best Practice Report Template

Article length
Show Case Best Practice Report would normally be less than 600 words to be accepted.

Name of program/initiative

Name of institution

Name of author

Issue the initiative was designed to address

Desired outcomes

Description of initiative
Who involved, role for students, training, budget, resources used/produced etc

Evaluation used or planned

Outcomes from this or earlier pilot

Contact person

Instructions for authors

For information on page layout, font, and formatting requirements please see JANZSSA Submission Guidelines.

Enquiries

Any queries regarding submission format should be directed to either of the editors. See contact details below.

Non-refereed articles

Show Case Best Practice Reports are submitted for publication without being peer-refereed and will be published at the discretion of the editors.

Deadlines

Contributors should observe a deadline three months earlier than the date noted below for other articles.

JANZSSA publishes: in April and October each year. Deadline for submission of Show Case Best Practice Reports is February 14th and August 15th respectively.

Before submitting your Show Case Best Practice Report

Please refer to the following check list and complete these actions prior to submission of the article.

Please check:

- JANZSSA page layout has been used

- JANZSSA font type and font size requirements have been used

- JANZSSA referencing system (APA style) has been used throughout and that all references are included.

- Spelling, grammar and punctuation reviewed.

- All diagram and table contents are position and text correct (i.e. text abbreviations used are consistent throughout diagram or table and that text is centred or left margin aligned.).

- Drawings included are inserted with Paste Special function so that the drawing is stable in the text.

- Do print and read for final corrections.

ANZSSA Executive and Regional and Interest Group Convenors

This group also functions as the Editorial Board of JANZSSA

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Convenors of Professional Interest Groups

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Information about ANZSSA

Information about ANZSSA

The Australia New Zealand Student Services Association Inc (ANZSSA) is the professional association for all people working to support students in post-secondary education in Australia and New Zealand.

As an umbrella organisation for a wide range of professional workers, ANZSSA is uniquely placed to provide professional development activities which will deepen understanding of the principles and philosophies of student support and provide a venue for training in best practice in the profession of student support.

This is done through meetings, seminars, workshops and conferences where experienced practitioners present in their areas of expertise.

These meetings provide the basis for peer support amongst staff across institutions. This occurs informally and more formally through professional interest groups.

Aims of ANZSSA:

- To foster and promote support amongst students and staff in the post-secondary education sector..
- To facilitate the general well-being of the institutional community in universities and other post-secondary institutions.
- To sponsor the professional development of members through regular conferences and organise close professional contact between members.
- To promote research.
- To support and promote the interests of all those engaged in these activities.

Professional Development Activities

A Biennial Conference is the major ANZSSA meeting. It is a significant and substantial conference which attracts numerous international participants as well as delegates from the Australian States and New Zealand.

Regional and State meetings are the main ANZSSA events between biennial conferences. Regional activities range from informal workshops to visiting speakers and, in some cases, regular three day conferences.

Communication with Members and website:

At the time of publication of this issue of JANZSSA, the ANZSSA website was under redevelopment and about to be launched under a new URL. The new website will contain a range of features for members, including new ways to communicate across and within our various networks. Members will be advised of the new URL as soon as the web site is launched.

Publications

JANZSSA, the Journal of ANZSSA, is published and distributed to members twice per year. Members are encouraged to contribute a variety of material: scholarly articles, information communications, comments, book reviews, and items of interest to the general membership can all be accommodated.

Membership

Membership is open to all those who:

- work directly with post-secondary students in various aspects of service provision to students
- have responsibility for ensuring that students receive the services and assistance they need
- who have an interest in the area of student services