Tailor-making a transition program to cater for student diversity

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Abstract

Many institutions now have transition programs to assist students with settling into University in the early days of their course. This is the case for Science students at the University of Melbourne. However at Melbourne we have a second degree in Science, the Bachelor of Biomedical Science, which has a very high intake of students from overseas for whom English is not their first language. Another layer of diversity in this group is the science background of the students. Our traditional transition program was not fulfilling the needs of these students and as a consequence of their feedback we have developed a separate transition program.

This workshop will introduce some of the strategies we are using to cater for this diversity, along with the evaluation results of the modified program. We will also call for input from participants to share their ideas and details about programs that cater for the diversity of students in their courses.

Many institutions now have well established transition programs. This is the case at the University of Melbourne. Every Faculty has a variety of strategies and programs to assist students in settling into first year. In our Faculty a program which commences in week 2 of semester has been running successfully since 2000.

A recent addition to the Science Faculty program has been a second degree, the Bachelor of Biomedical Science. This degree has a very high intake of students from overseas for whom English is not their first language. Another layer of diversity in this group is the science background of the students. In 2004 we decided to run our ‘traditional’ transition program for this group of students and we soon realised as a consequence of the their feedback, that this program was not fulfilling the needs of these students.

Each year since, we have responded to student and staff feedback and modified the program. While this is a program within the Faculty of Science we can see that some of the ideas we have used to tailor-make the program to fit this cohort of students can be used in any Faculty. The programme now includes three workshops in weeks 1 to 3, plus ongoing study groups for the rest of the semester.

The program is administered from Science Faculty and key issues in how to administer such a program effectively have evolved over this time.
In 2006 the program commenced with a workshop in week 1. Starting as early as possible is an outcome from the student feedback.

**Session 1 (week 1)**

Activities focused on networking within the Biomedical group by sitting students in small groups with a postgraduate facilitator to discuss what was the biggest difference between their first few days at University and their final year at school. The second part of this session was devoted to “Maximising the effectiveness of lectures”. The language skills and science background of these students meant that early lectures in particular were a challenge. In this second segment a short mock lecture on “Melanoma” – with input from several disciplines and staff was included. Students were told to take notes, discuss their notes with others in the group and the follow-up was provided by academic staff discussing effective strategies for note-taking and what to do after a lecture.

**Session 2 (week 2)**

Two workshop sessions were offered, for students who have not completed VCE (Year 12) Biology or Physics. Students were likely to attend one only of these sessions.

**Biology:** There was discussion about the different lecturing styles of the lecturers in the subject with specific ways of coping with a particular style. For instance how do you cope with the lecturer who speaks quickly when your English language skills are not as strong? How do you to cope with the terminology because it is all new to you?.

Students were introduced to the idea of Concept maps and how these provide a way of integrating topics and providing the ‘big picture’.

Students interacted with one of the Biology tutors in a short segment on the derivation of biological terms from Latin and Greek roots. Students were shown that by learning some key components of words they could extrapolate this to new terminology.

**Physics:** The emphasis of the session was skills to equip students for their learning in Physics throughout the year. It began with introducing students to the use of concept maps as a review tool, using the concepts introduced in the lecture on Melanoma from the first session. This was followed with an segment developing students’ problem-solving strategies. Students practised problem-solving skills using the concepts arising from week 1 lectures.

In 2006 approximately 130 students of the 186 confirmed first-year students attended the sessions and the co-ordinators of both sessions commented positively on students’ level of engagement in the sessions.

**Session 3 (week 3)**

The activities centred on advice to students about ways to optimise their study strategies, taking into account their individual learning styles. Staff from the Language and Learning Skills Unit provided input on learning styles. Students were asked to complete an online questionnaire prior to the session to find out about their preferred learning styles. We have found that the learning styles students bring from an oversea’s institution can result in difficulty with asking questions of academic staff and speaking up in tutorials or practicals if they do not understand a concept.

The last activity was to discuss with their postgraduate facilitator what they would do in the first study group.
Ongoing
Students meet in study groups weekly with a facilitator to assist, but not run, the group. Each group has been assigned a room in which to meet. The facilitators have been trained for the role and continue to be resourced by Faculty secretariat and academic staff. The facilitator will be a conduit between Faculty and the group in supplying timely information throughout the semester.

At the end of the workshops the program is evaluated and again at the end of semester. The methodology of the evaluation will be shared with the group.

This is only one program where we have catered for diversity. The Nuts and Bolts session will provide a forum in which to share with others what strategies they have used.