

Academic support for first year students transferring to other programs

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Abstract

Recognising that some commencing students use particular degree programs as a pathway to their preferred degree, Flinders University staff developed an academic skills program to support these students in achieving their wish of transferring to another program. Using the Bachelor of Health Science (BHS) as an example, students undertake a number of first and second year topics, increasing the difficulty and complexity of their first year experience at university. Flinders University recognises the use of pathways with a policy of guaranteeing places when the student completes 36 units with a grade point average (GPA) of 6.0 or greater. The academic support program which was developed assists students with learning core skills such as assignment writing, critiquing, referencing and exam preparation, given the heightened anxiety associated with achieving

Strong demand and competition for entry into various undergraduate degrees has tertiary entry scores out of the reach of some students. Therefore, these students use alternate pathways to gain entry into their preferred destination program after one year. At Flinders University, one such pathway is the Bachelor of Health Science program, which students use for entry into the Bachelor of Health Science (Paramedic) (BHS(P)) or Bachelor of Nutrition and Dietetics (BND).

The BHS(P) students undertake a program of first and second year core BHS topics over two semesters. A newly introduced policy allows for a guaranteed place in the BHS(P) program if students complete 36 units and achieve a grade point average (GPA) of 6.0 and above. This means that students are required to achieve grades of a distinction (75%) or better. This can be problematic for students who are new to university life, such as mature age students.

The following is a list of the topics which would comprise a 36 unit of first and second year topics:

| Semester 1 | | Semester 2 | |
|--|-----|---|-----|
| HLTH 1302 Introduction to the Health Professions | 4.5 | HLTH 1303 Reforming Health Care | 4.5 |
| HLTH 1004 Bioscience | 4.5 | HLTH 2002 Health: A Psychological Perspective | 6 |
| HLTH 1304 Communication for Health Practitioners | 4.5 | NURS 2108 Mental Health & Mental Illness | 6 |
| HLTH 2003 Society & Health: | 6 | | |

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|----------------------------|--|--|--|
| Sociology and Epidemiology | | | |
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Table 1: 2010 program of core BHS topics for transferring students

Similarly, those students wishing to gain entry to the BND program use either the life science or nutrition stream in the BHS program as a lateral transfer after their second year. The BND program is limited by clinical placement numbers in third and fourth year, therefore students using the various BHS streams are made aware of the increased competition for transfer places, from the commencement of their program. The BND program is excluded from the guaranteed place transfer policy.

The increasing numbers of transfer students (or ‘wanna be’s’) expressing their desire came to the attention of the first author. The time, academic support and pastoral care which was initially provided as an informal arrangement now necessitated more formal support programs. A successful grant application for teaching and learning support enabled the collaboration with the Student Learning Centre (SLC), to provide academic skills sessions for this cohort of students in the past two years.

The SLC was identified as the key stakeholder in developing an academic skills support program for the tertiary transfer students. The SLC, as experts in the teaching of developmental academic skills for students, developed a program after a consultative focus group with students in order to address the learning needs of this specific cohort. Initially the program was conducted twice weekly for five weeks, however this was revised last year to a two day intensive during mid-semester break. The program covered topics such as assignment writing, critiquing, referencing and exam preparation. The sessions were conducted at the campus where all of the social health science topics are taught, which is remote to the main campus where the SLC is located.

Student evaluation of the sessions reveal that the assignment writing , referencing sessions and exam preparation were well attended. Other results revealed that students found the sessions were beneficial and were presented in a helpful manner. In continuing to meet the needs of this cohort, the academic skills session program will become a mainstay in the student support program again this year.

This initiative highlights that not all first year to university students will enrol or participate in first year designed topics. This then raises a number of questions for first year teachers: how to recognise potential tertiary transfer students, assessing their learning needs, designing an appropriate first year program - given the inclusion of second year topics, ensuring students remain focussed on learning rather than assessment outcomes and ensuring student success at the end of the year.

The numerous challenges as listed above prove problematic when trying to create a supportive environment (Wilson & Lizzio 2007) as well a supportive pedagogy (Kift 2009) for students. Given that the BHS program is scaffolded to incrementally build skills over the three year program, the challenge then is how as first year teachers can we engage with these students in a first year program which includes second year topics? This is indeed problematic, given the varying academic capabilities of students and the expectations of second year teaching staff. This has been identified and addressed this year with a peer mentoring program, in which successful tertiary transfer students, will mentor prospective tertiary transfer students to ensure that they are able to make themselves known to teaching staff as a ‘wanna be’ student particularly to those teaching second year topics.

In addition to the partnerships with the SLC, the core BHS teaching team has been made aware of the specific learning needs of tertiary transfer students. The BHS teaching team spans the School of Medicine and School of Nursing and Midwifery in the Faculty of Health Science. Consultative strategies with various topic coordinators, are made aware of the academic skills program in order to promote it to prospective students.

A number of future initiatives to be considered for the tertiary transfer students would include combined tutor training, which would ensure all part time or casual teaching staff are made aware of the specific needs of tertiary transfer students. Also, the specific allocation of tutorial sessions for transfer students may assist students in having a dedicated tutor to create a supportive learning environment. At the BHS orientation session, tertiary transfer students were identified and counselled separately, enabling them to be made aware of the academic skills session and other support services available. Working with the SLC, student and staff feedback from academic skills sessions will be used to ensure that the support program remain appropriately targeted to meet student needs.

What remains challenging for the student experience, as they journey through this program of study, is managing their anxieties around assessment outcomes. While they remain focussed on their goal of transferring to their preferred program, some students are seemingly missing the learning at the expense of attaining the requirements of the assessment. The transition experience is not only a transition to university, but another transition when they commence their second year in another program. This is another anxiety laden experience for those students who gain entry into the BHS(P) program as they effectively condense a three year clinical program major into two years.

Outcomes of FYHE session

Given that previous FYHE conferences have addressed a number of issues in this paper such as transition experiences, building partnerships, academic support programs, by drawing on the uniqueness of this case study highlights how first year students transition experience can occur more than once. Further it is perhaps an indication of the importance of not isolating one such issue, but realising that the multiplicity of issues which first year students experience. In revisiting existing principles of the first year experience – creating supportive environments for success as well as pedagogically - this paper highlights the importance of building relationships – for both students and teaching staff.

Session outline

Whole group discussion ice breaker (5 mins): Consider the question: what is the experience of a tertiary transfer student? Do we need to change the way we think about the transition experience for first year at university students?

Facilitators (5 minutes): Outline of tertiary transfer policy and program initiative at Flinders University.

Paired discussion (10 mins): Ask pairs of participants to brainstorm the issues of tertiary transfer students within their own institutions or discuss how existing support services and systems can assist first year students within their home institutions. Specifically consider - value to participants; value to students; value to institution in order to assist with raising awareness of the transition experience

Facilitators + Whole group discussion (10 mins): Draw together ideas from floor – what has come up that has not been part of Flinders experience so far that may be taken back to the Flinders University BHS and SLC staff.

References

Kift S (2009) 'Articulating a transition pedagogy to scaffold and to enhance the first year student learning experience in Australian higher education' ALTC, Strawberry Hills, NSW.

Wilson K & Lizzio A (2007) 'First Year Tutor Training' Griffith University, Mt Gravatt, QLD.