Integrated learning centres: enhanced life and learning support for all students

Carmen Yan
Faculty of Science Monash University

Abstract

Learning centres provide an opportunity to create learning communities that can greatly benefit students from diverse backgrounds. Such academic support initiatives do not just benefit first year students for the duration of their transition year into university. The academic and social skills gained can help set students up for a lifetime and this deserves investment from universities. HEPPP funding received from DEEWR was used to support this project. This paper outlines a model of five integrated learning centres used by the Faculty of Science, Monash University, to provide both academic and social support to students. The aim of the project was to enhance the transition experience of first year science students in general but especially those from a low socioeconomic background.

Introduction

Following the Bradley Review's (2008) recommendations to increase the participation of low socioeconomic status (LSES) students in higher education, the Australian Government set the goal of raising LSES enrolments to 20 per cent of total enrolments at the undergraduate level by 2020 (Australian Government, 2009). The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) provided universities with funding under the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) to support universities in achieving this goal.

Monash University allocated part of the funding to support centrally run initiatives and divided the rest among the faculties according to their number of LSES enrolments. The Faculty of Science received this funding in mid-2011. A project officer, who was also a recent LSES science graduate, was appointed to manage and run various HEPPP funded initiatives targeted at first year LSES students to help these students transition successfully into university. The most successful of these programs is the integrated learning centres that provide free academic support to all first year students undertaking a science unit, with an emphasis on targeting LSES students. This paper aims to provide an overview of what the learning centres are, briefly describe this initiative’s impact on first year science students and present the challenges that are yet to be resolved.

Overview and rationale for the program

A comprehensive body of research (O’Shea, H., Onsman, A., & Mckay, J., 2011) has documented the experience of LSES students in higher education. One thing that is clear and perhaps unsurprisingly so is the fact that even with entry assistance schemes, such as the Special Entry Access Scheme (SEAS), that allow more LSES students to access university, this is not enough to create a real opportunity for these students (Tinto, V., 2008). Even though participation is increased much more needs to be in put in place to support students in their studies and retain them at university (Devlin, M., 2010). It would be irresponsible and
costly for institutions to accept students into courses without also providing them with the tools to succeed. As Devlin (2010) stressed in her article and again in many of her papers, students from LSES backgrounds lack the social and cultural capital to succeed at university and as a result have particular challenges to overcome to survive and thrive in the higher education setting. Typically, new LSES students would have had limited exposure to the university culture and environment prior to arriving at university if family and friends have not gone through the process. They lack someone with experience to talk to and relate to. For many of these students a fear of embarrassment may hinder their ability to successfully transition into university, especially if they are reluctant to seek help or don’t know where to seek help. Academics who work closely with students therefore play an important role in recognising these struggles and proactively providing appropriate assistance.

The papers by Devlin, M., Kift, S., Nelson, K., Smith, L., & McKay, J. (2012b) and Benson, R., Hewitt, L., Devos, A., Crosling, G., & Heagney, M. (2009) both highlighted some of the key factors that contributed to the success of LSES students. While many important factors for success, such as emotional support from family and friends, were identified as outside the scope of university services, academic support was also found to be essential in helping students reach their goals. Providing flexible modes of academic support in the form of learning centres has the potential to contribute significantly to the success of all students. The ‘Science Access Monash Mentorship Program’ designed and run by Gerry Rayner and Juliey Beckman (2011) from the School of Biological Sciences informed many aspects of the current learning centres initiative. In particularly, the need for tutors to provide both pastoral care and academic assistance in the centres was highlighted by the program. Many benefits can also be derived from lecturers and tutors offering practical advice on life skills support services that the university provides because students may not otherwise know about them. Examples include the learning skills unit of the library, counselling service, budgeting seminars and various workshops. Sessional tutors employed in the centres need to be knowledgeable about these services. To assist with this every tutor is given a handbook with all available university support services listed with relevant web links. The integrated learning centres were therefore established with the aim of creating learning communities (Tinto, V., 2012) where both academic and social support for students is made available.

There are five schools embedded within the Faculty of Science (Biology, Chemistry, Geosciences, Mathematics and Physics). Prior to receiving the HEPPP funding, each school had offered some forms of academic support but these varied greatly in shape and size across the five schools and availability was limited. They operated independently of each other and as such the flow of information about students needing or receiving assistance was minimal. When the project officer was appointed this provided an opportunity for the faculty to link in with each of the schools and facilitate the flow of information between these different groups. The HEPPP funding also enabled the creation of new learning centres and supplementation of existing ones resulting in an overall more consistent approach. All five schools now have a learning centre, each offering ten hours of free tutoring per week to first year science students for twelve weeks per semester.

The HEPPP project officer coordinates the tutoring services and liaises with the first year coordinators from each of the five schools regularly to continually develop this initiative. This involves monitoring the running of the learning centres throughout the year and consistently gathering feedback from the learning centres’ tutors. Each centre differs in the format in which they deliver their tutoring sessions. In other words, some offer one to one assistance, some offer a drop-in service and others offer both. This means that each learning centre is able to evolve to better cater for their specific cohort as one model doesn’t

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necessarily fit all the schools. A benefit of having a coordinator is the ability to gather information from and provide feedback to all of the schools efficiently. Patterns of what work well and what doesn’t work quickly become apparent. An example of this occurred in the first semester of running the learning centres. Each school planned to operate from week one to week twelve but despite heavy advertising, non-attendance was an issue in the first week. It was evident that this was a problem across the schools and starting in week two and continuing until SWOTVAC would be a more effective model. This was implemented in all schools the following semester resulting in better use of tutors’ time. Developing the integrated learning centres is an ongoing process and open communication is vital.

In addition, the tutors from the five schools compiled lists of students who were at risk of failing in their respective units and from those smaller lists a larger one was compiled by the project officer and shared with the unit coordinators. Those who were identified as at risk of failing multiple units were then contacted by phone to have an informal discussion about their academic progress and directed to relevant support services as appropriate. This exchange of information between the schools and the project officer has been very useful on many levels.

**Effectiveness of the program**

Our current student data on retention and academic progress is very limited. Because the program only started in the second half of 2011, we cannot at this time observe any trends or improvements in retention or academic progress of our LSES students. The data does show an increase in retention rates from 2011 to 2012 but since the data is so limited, meaningful conclusions cannot be drawn.

As a result, feedback from tutors and students has been used to assess the effectiveness of the program thus far. The main benefit of having tutors rostered in the learning centres on a regular basis was students had a friendly face to turn to and they knew when and where the tutors could be found. Often, the tutors were also first year laboratory demonstrators and this familiarity was useful for developing rapport and breaking down the barrier between tutor and student. In general, the centres have been found to be particularly useful to students who:

- needed to catch up on missed lectures or laboratory classes
- did not have a strong background or foundation in the subject matter
- had trouble working on their own or preferred working with others
- needed to develop various academic skills
- wanted to discuss study related issues but were reluctant to speak to a lecturer

The tutoring sessions were also conducive to group learning. Commonly asked questions were typically addressed by the tutor in a group setting to avoid repeatedly answering the same questions. This was sometimes supplemented by discussions that connected students who did not initially know each other. These discussions were very interactive because they were frequently accompanied by students drawing whiteboard diagrams, presenting conflicting arguments and exercising their problem solving skills. Tutors also commented on how this style of problem solving eliminated the focus on the individual and widened participation to the group. This helped students develop their understanding of the material in an engaging and non-threatening environment. Such a learning community can help students develop team work skills that would be useful for a career in scientific research.

Through informal discussions with tutors, students also had the opportunity to nurture their interest in science. General discussions about science, the specific unit topics, careers
aspirations, course advice and further information about the journey through academia are all very useful for first year students. One of the most encouraging results was when tutors expressed that through these informal discussions students began to realise that tutors and other students all shared similar concerns and doubts in themselves and their ability to achieve. When they realised they were not alone this provided relief and boosted confidence. These discussions have been found to be rewarding for both tutors and students.

These are very encouraging results for the integrated learning centres thus far. Additional formal data collection would greatly improve our understanding of our student cohort and their use of the various support programs available.

Challenges

A major obstacle for measuring student engagement in this initiative was obtaining student data on attendance. Students were not identified and the number of students attending each centre was not accurately or consistently recorded across the schools. Various methods for recording this information have been tried and tested with little success. Students did not proactively record their attendance even when the necessity was made explicit. Tutors found it difficult to keep track of who was coming and going while assisting other students at the same time. Other than some preliminary survey data, we currently do not have a method for identifying how many LSES students used these services. This data is very important for reporting purposes, monitoring growth and securing future funding for this project.

Increasing the number of students who use the learning centres is one of our primary goals. Benson, R. et al. (2009) identified that LSES students showed reluctance to approaching academic staff for help despite needing assistance. Normalising help seeking behaviour is therefore important for bridging the gap between students and academics. This is one of the key recommendations put forward by Devlin, M., Kift, S., Nelson, K., Smith, L., & McKay, J. (2012a) in the report, “Effective Teaching and Support of Students from Low Socioeconomic Status Backgrounds: Practical Advice for Teaching Staff”. Devlin, M. et al. (2009) suggested one way to achieve this may be to advertise and discuss support services openly in a positive way. Rather than characterising support services as a remedial solution for those who are ‘struggling’ or deficit in ability, describing them as common or routine for first year students is more likely to encourage help-seeking behaviour and use of support services.

Finding suitable tutors also posed a challenge for some schools. The ideal candidate needed to have an interest in education and providing support to first year students in need of assistance. Tutors needed to be knowledgeable about the content of the units offered by the schools so often they would need to have or be completing their PhD. A tutor who was also a current demonstrator in first year laboratory classes was also preferred because they would be well-informed about the content of laboratory classes and other administrative tasks. As such, often the ideal candidate had time constraints that limited their availability. Furthermore, a good understanding of the university and its support services was also desirable so a current or past student or staff would make great candidates if only they were available.

Another challenge was finding appropriate spaces to hold learning centres when university spaces are limited and highly contended for. Having a convenient permanent location for study/tutoring sessions is vital to facilitate uptake of the service. Even with the same level of advertising, there were very few attendees for one school that did not have a space which was well-known to first year students. Since the move to a bigger, more prominent space, the learning centre has flourished. Unfortunately, spaces for non-compulsory classes can come
and go depending on the demand for them to be used for compulsory classes. One solution may be to hold learning centres during the evenings instead of office hours but this could severely limit the number of students who can easily access the service.

**Session plan:**

Brief PowerPoint presentation (10 mins): This presentation will provide an overview of the integrated learning centres and present the key findings from student and tutor feedback. The presenter will take questions at the end of presentation (5 mins).

Small group discussion (2 x 6 mins): Please consider and discuss the following questions:

1. Is this type of academic tutoring already in place for your discipline or institution? Is there something different, like PASS perhaps? What are the pro and cons of these different approaches?
2. Would this type of academic tutoring be suitable for your discipline or institution? If not, why not? If so, could it be easily implemented or are there challenges you anticipate will need to be overcome?

Summation (3 mins)

**References**


