Making the implicit explicit: Successful student skills for commencing cohorts

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Abstract

Making institutional expectations explicit using clear and common language engages commencing students and promotes help-seeking behaviour. When first year students enter university they cross the threshold into an unfamiliar environment (Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith & McKay, 2012). Universities endeavour to provide appropriate learning support services and resources; however research suggests that there is limited up take of these services, particularly in high risk students (Nelson-Field & Goodman, 2005).

The Successful Student Skills Checklist is a tool which will be trialled during the 2013 Orientation period at the QUT Caboolture campus. The new tool is a response to the university’s commitment to provide “an environment where [students] are supported to take responsibility for their own learning, and to embrace an active role in succeeding to their full potential” (QUT, 2012, 6.2.1). This paper will outline the design of the support tool implemented during Orientation, as well as discuss the anticipated outcomes of the trial.

Caboolture context

Queensland University of Technology (QUT) Caboolture Campus is a regional satellite campus situated 44 kilometres north of Brisbane. Approximately 400 students will commence university at the Caboolture campus in Semester 1, 2013, in the four discipline areas of Business, Creative Industries, Education and Nursing (QUT unpublished corporate data, 2013). All commencing students are encouraged to attend Orientation day, as one event in a suite of university wide activities.¹ The small campus environment of Caboolture fosters close collegial relationships where academics and library staff frequently collaborate. This environment also provides a unique opportunity to pilot innovative support systems for first year students on a small scale, with the long term view of reviewing and then implementing university wide.

¹ QUT defines orientation as “...a process of academic and social integration to facilitate learning engagement; just-in-time information provision and timely access to support services, [with] a particular focus on critical time periods such as Orientation Week (“O Week”)” (QUT, 2012, 6.2.3)
Literature Review

When first year students enter university they are crossing the threshold into an unfamiliar environment (Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith & McKay, 2012). Their unfamiliarity with university processes and institutional expectations present them with distinct learning needs. Universities need to be aware of those needs and put processes in place that are responsive to them (Pithers & Holland, 2006). First year students’ transition from pre-enrolment to tertiary student should be aided by learning environments that are designed to meet their learning needs and provide them with services to assist them through that transition (Janson & van der Meer, 2007). Nelson, Kift and Clarke (2008) assert that promotion of student engagement and support should commence within the first few weeks. This is essential for transition from the pre-enrolment to tertiary student phase.

However, simply providing a service to support students is not enough, students need to be made aware of the services and encouraged to utilise them. Being unaware of study requirements and support services in the new and unfamiliar environment can have a huge impact on success rates. Benson et al. (as cited in Devlin & McKay, 2001) assert that only a limited number of students utilise central university support services. Nelson-Field and Goodman (2005) discovered that the majority of high risk students within their study were not aware of the institutions support services and 81% did not use it. This contrasted with only 58% of low risk students who had not used support services.

Pithers and Holland (2006) explored first year students’ expectations of university. Effective communication was identified as being a significant factor for engagement. Benseman, Coxon, Anderson and Anae (2006) suggest that in order for educational facilities to be able to retain students, communication between students and the institution needs to be a major focus. The experience of students within their first year at university and their ability to engage with university processes has a major impact on attrition rates (Nelson, Kift & Clarke, 2009). Students who were questioned about their reasons for deciding to leave university study revealed such factors as problems with adjustment to the university and uncertainty about what is expected (Jansen & van der Meer (2007). Institutions need to communicate from the student’s point of view and level of understanding (Janson & van der Meer, 2007), and empower students by making the implicit explicit (Murphy as cited in Devlin et al., 2012).

The development and use of a checklist to explicitly solidify the initial expectations of what MUST be known to succeed at university, empowers students to self identify their needs. Once self identification is evident, a clear path for success, which is communicated at the level of understanding that meets the student’s needs, can be created.

Making the Library relevant

There are several reasons for trialling a new approach to the orientation service talk. The Library traditionally has a 30 minute time slot during Orientation which all commencing students attend. Ideally, these sessions have been hands-on workshops in a computer lab allowing interaction with the Library’s online learning and study support resources and services. Given the constraints of increasing commencing student numbers, and the availability of lab resources, this approach had become impractical. A new approach was needed to engage students beyond the service talk.
As well as addressing these resourcing constraints, the new checklist tool was a response to anecdotal evidence that students do not identify with relevance of the Library’s learning and study support services and resources for themselves. While it is acknowledged that students are often overwhelmed with information during Orientation events, the Library in particular appears to be a low priority for commencing students. Responses from the Caboolture campus 2012 Orientation survey (QUT unpublished corporate data, 2012), shows that students on the day identified lunch as almost as valuable as the library session, in assisting with their future study. This reveals a clear need to make explicit the importance of accessing the Library’s learning and study support services, for all commencing students.

**Development and implementation**

The initial concept was a simple checklist for students’ to self assess their preparedness for university, particularly focusing on study skills. The Academic Skills Advisor (ASA) collaborated and consulted with academics from all of the disciplines on campus to create a list of ‘skills’, ‘awareness’ and ‘access’ as an archetype of a successful student. This was translated into more accessible language – Do, Know, Have. These categories were then prioritised into Must, Should and Could. There are some skills and knowledge that students must know about in order to succeed and thrive at university. These are presented to students as MUST items. There are other skills and knowledge that students SHOULD employ in order to thrive in their university study. These are not essential, but will certainly make student life more comfortable. Finally there are things students COULD know and do which will enrich their university experience. Having identified these skills and knowledge, connections were then mapped to existing learning and study support resources services.

It is planned that in a lecture style environment, it will be made explicit to commencing students that there are some skills and knowledge that all successful students share. Using examples and accessible language, students will self-assess whether they possess particular study skills. Having identified a skill, students will be then be directed to an existing service or resource for further development. It is hoped that students will be empowered to seek help and utilise existing resources and services to ensure they have the necessary skill set to survive and thrive in their study.

Response pads will be used in the sessions to enable students to identify areas on concern, while remaining anonymous. It is anticipated that common concerns will be about academic writing and referencing skills. By making this public knowledge, it is hoped that help seeking behaviour will be normalised. Students will also create and take away a personal heat-map as a reminder of skills and knowledge that they personally want or need to develop. Students will have the opportunity to enrol in workshops later in the day at a Library Learning & Research booth, and they will be encouraged to talk to academic and library staff about other support resources and services on the day.

**Intended outcomes and review**

It is acknowledged that individuals bring their own strengths and knowledge to the university environment. By creating a process for students to self identify development needs, it is intended that they will be empowered to seek help and utilise existing support services and resources. Ideally, students will take responsibility for their own development and prioritise their preparation for study. By making explicit the skills and knowledge of a successful
student, as well as mapping clear links to existing support services and resources, students will be empowered to develop their own learning plan, and set their own learning priorities.

The Successful Student Skills Checklist will be trialled during the Semester 1, 2013 Orientation at the Caboolture Campus. Student responses will be recorded on the day indicating the common concerns for these commencing students. This early feedback may influence the schedule of Library workshops offered during Orientation period. This will also be useful for academics, so that they can directly address these concerns early in the semester. Uptake of Library learning and study support services will be monitored for increased engagement, indicating an increase in help-seeking behaviour. It is also anticipated that a campus wide survey of commencing students during week five will provide feedback about the longer term benefits of the checklist session.

Conclusion

The Successful Student Skills Checklist will be trialled at a small satellite campus of QUT. It is the result of cross campus collaboration between library and academic staff. The purpose of the tool is to make institutional expectations explicit to commencing students, thereby enabling them to self identify early empowerment and engagement of first year university students it is anticipated that there will be a greater uptake of support programs with potential impact on students continuing successfully in their studies beyond their first year.

Nuts and Bolts Session

The first ten minutes of the session will be an outline of the Successful Student Checklist as described in this submission. This will provide the backdrop for a small group discussion activity. Focus questions for the audience will be about uptake of learning support services and programs. The responses to the questions will form the basis for group discussion. An outcome for the session will be to raise awareness of first year students’ needs and expectations. Explicit communication and clear institutional expectations to assist in a smooth transition from pre enrolment to tertiary status will be demonstrated.
References


Making the implicit explicit: Successful student skills for commencing cohorts, Nuts & Bolts.