Improving student success with online embedded tutor support

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Abstract

Institutional commitment to the student experience in the early stages of university has the greatest potential to exceed student expectations. The cross-institutional Embedded Tutors Program provides undergraduate students with access to subject content experts across 12 first-year subjects across the university. Tutors provide one-on-one draft assessment feedback on a large written assessment task. A total of 428 students attended 615 online tutor sessions. Students who met with a tutor had higher average assessment marks and cumulative subject marks than students who did not attend a session. Feedback from students was incredibly positive, with 78% of students rating the tutor session 'extremely helpful'. This study provides evidence of the value of subject-specific draft feedback for students in first-year subjects.

Proposal

Rationale

Universities worldwide are looking for ways to improve student performance outcomes including student experience, student success and graduate employment outcomes. There is a wide body of literature describing best practice transition pedagogy, which promotes an educational framework to increase student engagement through acknowledgement of the multi-faceted influences on the first-year student experience (Nelson et al., 2012). Determinants of student engagement and success include access to resources, a sense of community and belonging, and preparedness.

Since 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted student experiences at universities worldwide and the rapid move to online learning undertaken by most institutions fast-tracked the use of technology in ways not seen before (Dhawan, 2020; Smith, 2021). Online meeting tools such as Zoom have been used at scale for all manner of learning and teaching activities from lectures and tutorials (Dhawan, 2020) to practical classes and exam invigilation (Diaz et al., 2021). The aim of this study was to provide timely, subject-specific support for first-year students. We hypothesise that subject-specific tutor support will increase assessment marks and subject grades.

Approach/method

A total of 2386 students were enrolled in the 12 first-year undergraduate subjects selected to participate in this study in semester 2 of 2021 as part of a larger, university-wide student retention project (Linden, 2022). One-on-one tutor support was offered to students in preparing at least one assessment item or 'draft assessment feedback'. These assessments had a value between 15% and 60%. Online meeting software (Zoom) was used to facilitate the online tutor sessions. The bookings were made using Calendly, an online scheduling tool that was embedded within the subject learning management system (LMS) site. Students were required to book a meeting and email a draft assessment before the booked time. Ethics approval was received from the Charles Sturt University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC Protocol No H21170). Marks for individual assessment items and cumulative subject marks (out of 100) that had been entered in

the LMS grading platform (Grade Centre) were analysed. Assessment mark and cumulative mark descriptive statistics were calculated, and group means were compared (Tutor, No Tutor) using a paired Student t-test. Significance was set at $p<0.05$. Student and tutor feedback regarding the program was collected using online surveys.

Results

In total, 428 students attended 615 tutor sessions with an embedded tutor. The students who met with a tutor had an average cumulative subject mark 6.2% higher than the students who did not meet with a tutor (Figure 1A, 67.4% vs 61.2%, $P<0.0001$). In total, 78 % (n=170) of the 219 students who provided feedback rated the program 5 'extremely helpful' (Figure 1B).

Figure 1. *A) Average cumulative mark. B) Student responses to 'Rate your experience'*
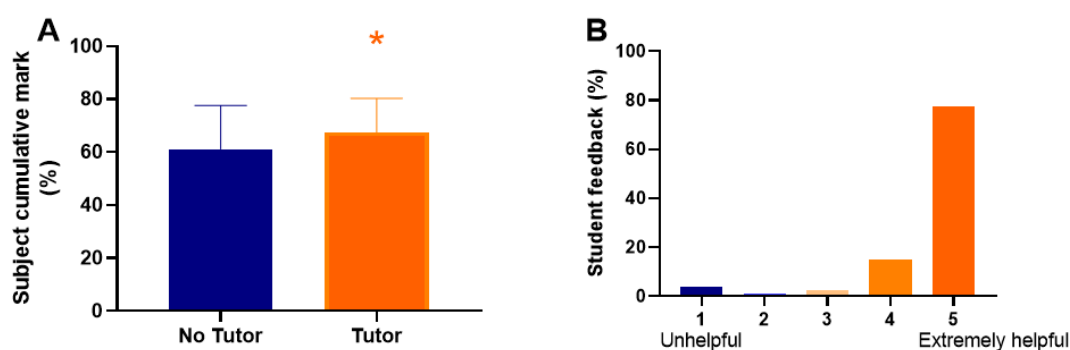
Questions for audience discussion

1. How could this approach to supporting students be targeted to students most at risk?
2. What are the outcomes or best measures of success for the program?

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