

The implementation of a Principal Tutor for first year psychology subjects at James Cook University Cairns Campus to increase student engagement.

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Background

Student engagement includes the usage of services and opportunities within the university and the amount of time and effort students put into their studies. This is directly related to overall student success and students' likelihood of continuing and completing their studies (Nelson Laird, Chen & Kuh, 2008). James Cook University in general, and in particular the Cairns Campus, has unique circumstances that impinge on the ability of students to engage with the institution. As there is no on-campus accommodation and the campus is some distance from the centre of the city, conditions are not conducive to the formation of a strong sense of community at the campus.

Compounding the location-related issues is the fact that psychology, as a discipline, draws a diverse range of students with varied backgrounds and with little understanding of the theoretical nature of the content a psychology degree. There much debate and confusion within the profession (let alone amongst students) as to the purpose of the Australian Psychology Accreditation Council (APAC, 2008) requirements for psychology degrees and what they mean for graduates (Kennedy & Innes, 2005). A significant proportion of graduates do not practice as psychologists and the diverse range of career options mean that integration of specific applied material into the curriculum is difficult at best. These issues have for some time had a negative impact on levels of student engagement amongst first year psychology students and have been experienced at other institutions also (O'Connor, Hansen & Thorne, 2009). Other factors that have previously had a detrimental effect at JCU include team teaching, academic staff workloads, implied competition for honours places and a high level of anxiety associated with statistics and research methods subjects. Due to these factors, psychology in Cairns has, in recent years, had poor retention of students beyond first year - as can be seen in Figure 1, below.

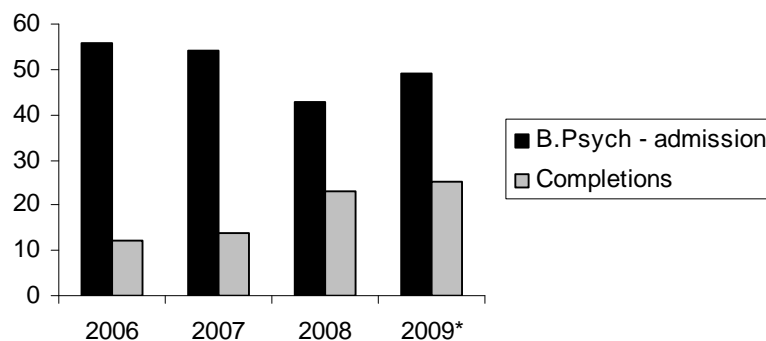


Figure 1. B. Psychology JCU Cairns admission vs. fourth year completion rates (internal Cairns students only). (* 2009 admissions SP1 only, 2009 completions estimate only).

In order to counter some of these problems, the Department of Psychology implemented a pilot program involving a 'Principal Tutor' for the 2008 academic year. The

Principal Tutor taught the majority of the first year tutorials and was charged with coordinating all tutorials, assessments and general administrative matters for all students enrolled in the two introductory psychology subjects. At first contact, students were welcomed to the discipline and notified that the Principal Tutor was the primary contact for all discipline related matters. With a background in Student Business Services and thorough knowledge of Australian Psychological Society (APS), Queensland Psychologists Registration Board and Australian Psychology Accreditation Council (APAC) requirements, the principal tutor was able to answer almost all enquiries psychology students had. This provided psychology students with a central contact and also allowed for the subject content to be contextualised within broader professional issues; which led to students having a better understanding of why they were learning specific theories as opposed to just being encouraged to rote learn the body of knowledge. Although this is no doubt common to many professional studies, the ability to integrate administrative information and professional information within the curriculum has helped students get a much better idea of the reasoning behind the vast theoretical ground covered in the two introductory subjects.

The Principal Tutor expanded on the mandate by implementing a number of additional strategies. The Principal Tutor has set up an online ‘Facebook’ group (Psychology at James Cook University Cairns) to allow students a convenient and open way to get to know each other (the group already has around 140 members for 2009). All assessment pieces were followed up with individual feedback specifically targeting students in the top and bottom 10-15% with extra encouragement and the Principal Tutor made a point of knowing the name of every student studying psychology at JCU Cairns at all year levels. In this way, this staff member became a central point to assist students with any academic or administrative issue and laid a foundation to help them get to know the university, their profession and each other.

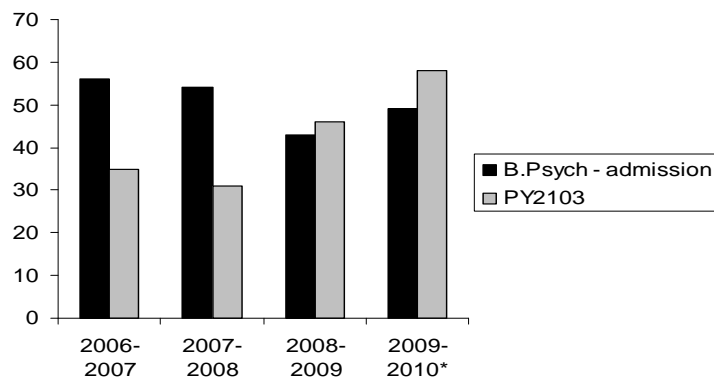


Figure 2. Retention of students from first year admission to a B. Psychology to PY2103 (core subject) the following year. (*2009 admission SP1 only, 2010 estimates based on 2008-2009 numbers)

Although this initiative has not been able to completely integrate applied content into the curriculum, feedback overall strongly suggests that the implementation of the Principal Tutor with added initiatives has had a significant positive influence on student engagement. An illustration of the change in retention rates can be seen in Figure 2. The retention of students was not only nearly total but many students in other degrees and disciplines changed course to a B. Psychology as a result of their experiences in first year psychology. This is the most noteworthy data supporting the success of the initiative. Students also reported that they found psychology to be more organised, more interesting and more appealing than subjects in other disciplines. The levels of satisfaction were also evident in Student Feedback Surveys for

the two subjects involved. The level of engagement with the institution and with each other has been demonstrated by a marked increase in involvement in student activities such as the Student Psychology Association, regular social gatherings and a vibrant discussion board space on the *Facebook* group. The level of engagement has increased to the point that students are now beginning to plan their own movie nights, careers meetings and an end of year ball for the psychological profession in Cairns. Second year students this year also appear to be performing at a much higher standard than have previous cohorts. Overall, it appears that these initiatives have had a considerable positive influence on student learning and engagement. The following student comment speaks best as to the success of the program:

“[The tutor] is fantastic as the principal tutor. He is very knowledgeable & provides more of an in depth learning experience than those of the lectures. His tutorials promote deeper thinking and enhancement of analytical techniques. He demonstrates passion for his field & that is highly motivating for students. He also provided the class with information of what is to be expected from coming years (expected workload, what marks we need to achieve to go onto honours, skills to manage the workload etc). He has offered to give subject selection advice & guidance when choosing our second year subjects. He has been the only person on campus that I have come across to give detailed & constructive academic advice. He is an invaluable resource to the psych faculty.” (From the Student Feedback Survey for PY1102, 2008)

The aim of the Principal Tutor initiative was to increase student engagement with the institution and the course content by providing consistent academic, administrative, career information and regular feedback using new techniques and technologies through one central contact. In this respect, this initiative has been an unqualified success with some interesting and surprising side-effects requiring further investigation.

Session Plan

- Introduction to student engagement issues
 - The Principal Tutor program and the need for a central point of contact
 - Social networking and the changing nature of communication with students
 - Outcomes (and side effects)
 - Application to other disciplines institutions
- Discussion

References

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