

Why do they come?: A review of individual student learning appointments

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With the increasing diversity of the first year student cohort, tertiary institutions are under pressure to provide a range of programs that enhance transition into university study. At the University of Tasmania (UTAS) a suite of student learning support programs sit alongside other initiatives for commencing students. This paper describes the evaluation of an initiative where individual student appointments were offered to students who self-reported issues with their university studies. Whilst the student feedback is overwhelmingly positive, the authors question how this strategy can be extended to better serve the needs of at risk students.

Introduction

There are many factors that have been identified as contributing to success at university (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006), but of these, a positive first year experience can be argued to be of primary importance (Kift, 2008; Krause & Coates, 2008; McInnis, 2001; Wosley, 2003; Yorke & Longden, 2008). However, the first year experience itself is multi-faceted, and encompasses academic, social and personal dimensions (Tinto, 1987). Even within these dimensions, there are many elements to consider. Focussing on the academic dimension, first year students are not only moving into study within a discipline area, but also required to have the necessary skills (or academic literacies) to enable them to do so. A third element is a more metacognitive one, “learning how to learn in higher education settings” (Krause, 2006, p. 7).

Recognising the critical nature of the first year experience for all students, current trends in higher education encouraging a much greater participation rate have somewhat complicated the landscape. The massification of the higher education sector has resulted in an increasing diversity

of the first year cohort, and correspondingly differing student needs during the important transition phase (Krause et al, 2005; McInnis & James, 1995). This is certainly true in the UTAS context where a period of significant institutional growth has seen numbers of commencing students double in the past 7 years (UTAS, 2009). A consequence of the growth agenda has been a move to more open and inclusive entrance requirements for some courses and a subsequent increase in diversity of the first year cohort. A focus on increasing access for rural students has also meant that there are many beginning students who are first in family to attend university.

The notion of facilitating the development of students' academic literacies lies at the heart of this paper and requires some introduction. Although academic literacy can be viewed in many ways it has its 'origins in work on study skills, writing support and courses in academic English' (McDowell, 2004, para 2). It can therefore be represented as a 'set of skills that students must master in order to perform successfully as scholar' (Henderson & Hirst, 2007, p1), encompassing: grammar; editing; genres of writing and referencing. From this perspective, development of academic literacy can be approached from a context neutral position and be seen to sit outside the realm of specific disciplines. Charging a central unit or generic advisors with the role of developing these skills in a university context is therefore not inconsistent with this view. Indeed, a review of the websites of many Australian universities reveals that this approach is common, as is provision of academic support for specific equity groups such as overseas students or students from non-English speaking backgrounds.

There is an extensive literature on academic advising, and this incorporates a range of practices and activities (Allen and Smith, 2008).

LAS are becoming commonly accepted for consultation by students who are experiencing difficulties with coursework, assignments as well as those from NESB in relation to specific language and cultural issues (Abu-Arab, 2008) and critical analysis and protocols of writing (Pang, 2009?)

The importance of the provision of academic advising to students at academic risk in terms of retention, satisfaction and success has been noted by Pascarella and Ternezini

Despite the skills approach to academic literacy being the dominant one in many universities this perspective is not without its critics. Researchers such as Lea and Street (1998) note that academic literacies can also be viewed as social practices stemming from the institution as a site of 'discourse and power' (p2). Henderson and Hirst (2007) also talk of an extension of the notion of academic literacy to '[take] account [of] the ways in which it is negotiated and reconstituted in historical, cultural and political contexts' (p 2). Consequently they advocate an approach to the development of academic literacy that enables the student to 'develop flexible literacy repertoires that can morph and adapt to changing conditions' (p3).

Although many centralised units exist in universities, and these offer assistance to students in the development of academic literacies or skills, it does not automatically follow that this stems from an institutional acceptance of a purely skills-based approach. In fact, movement towards an integrated transition pedagogy espoused by researchers such as Kift (2008) or viewing within a framework of graduate attributes (University of Wollongong, undated) suggest that academic literacies are being considered from a much broader perspective in Australian universities.

At UTAS, although there is attention paid to the ‘skills’ of grammar, punctuation, essay writing and referencing in enabling programs, an integrated suite of student learning support is offered to students. The Centre for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching (CALT), a central unit, offers: UniStart, a pre-semester introductory academic skills and acclimatisation program; central and unit-specific workshops; support developed with faculty staff and embedded in lectures and units; online resources; and individual learning support appointments for students. The individual appointments allow students to access support once they have immersed themselves in the discipline areas in which they are studying, and are tailored to specific needs of the student. It is these individual appointments that form the focus of this paper.

Methodology

The origin of this paper is the ongoing review of student learning support in CALT, with a focus on the evaluation of individual student learning appointments during the 2008 academic year. To inform this review, evaluative data was collected and recorded at several stages during the year.

Being grounded in a real world setting, a mixed methods approach to data collection, using multiple data sources was employed (Creswell, 2003). Data collection occurred in three phases:

Phase 1: Demographic information

- Number of students accessing appointments
- Number of appointments per student
- Location of student and location of appointment
- Faculty from which the students accessing appointments originates

Phase 2: Description of appointment

At the conclusion of each consultation, CALT academic staff noted the areas of student concern that had been identified during the consultation against pre-determined categories, as well as taking brief notes with respect to particular issues.

Phase 3: Student evaluation

Students who had attended individual appointments in 2008 were contacted by email to give evaluative feedback at the end of Semester 2 via a confidential survey (administered online through Survey Monkey). Participants provided their student number to verify student status and were entered into a draw for a \$100 book voucher. Following the draw, all student numbers were deleted from the data file. The survey contained questions to elicit demographic data, Likert scale questions to gauge satisfaction with the student appointment initiative, and open ended questions regarding the reason students sought assistance and their assessment of this assistance. The *a priori* categories utilised by staff to code consultations in Phase 2 were revised for the collection of student feedback in Phase 3.

Analysis of data has been through the use of descriptive statistics and thematic analysis and categorisation (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990).

Results

Phase 1

In 2008, 265 students accessed individual learning appointments in one of the three Tasmanian campuses. These were predominantly first year students, with a smaller number from second year, and a very small representation of third year and post-graduate students. In total, these students participated in 467 appointments, most commonly attending only one (68%) or two appointments (14%), with a small number accessing more than two appointments (18%). Although not specifically asked, approximately 15% of students attending the appointments identified as coming from a non-English speaking background.

Students attending the appointments were drawn from six of the University's seven major faculties: Arts; Education; Health Science; Science, Engineering and Technology; Business and the Australian Maritime College. No students who identified their primary faculty as Law attended an appointment in 2008. Twenty-six off-campus students (10%), all from the Health Science or Education faculties, were provided with assistance remotely (via phone, email and video-conference appointments). In terms of a proportion of the overall student population, the number of students attending individual learning support appointments is extremely low, representing less than 1% of the total student population.

Phase 2

A consideration of the different academic issues raised during the appointments shows that essay planning was the most common concept causing difficulty (Figure 1). One hundred and eighty students, representing almost 69% of students coming for appointments, required assistance with this concept. The second most commonly seen area of difficulty was paragraph structure, with 40% of students requiring some assistance. In the writing category, four students experienced some type of writing anxiety, others had more general issues that may well have intersected with these first two areas, along with grammar and punctuation.

Analysing questions and referencing were also common areas of concern, being addressed for 32% and 35% of students, respectively

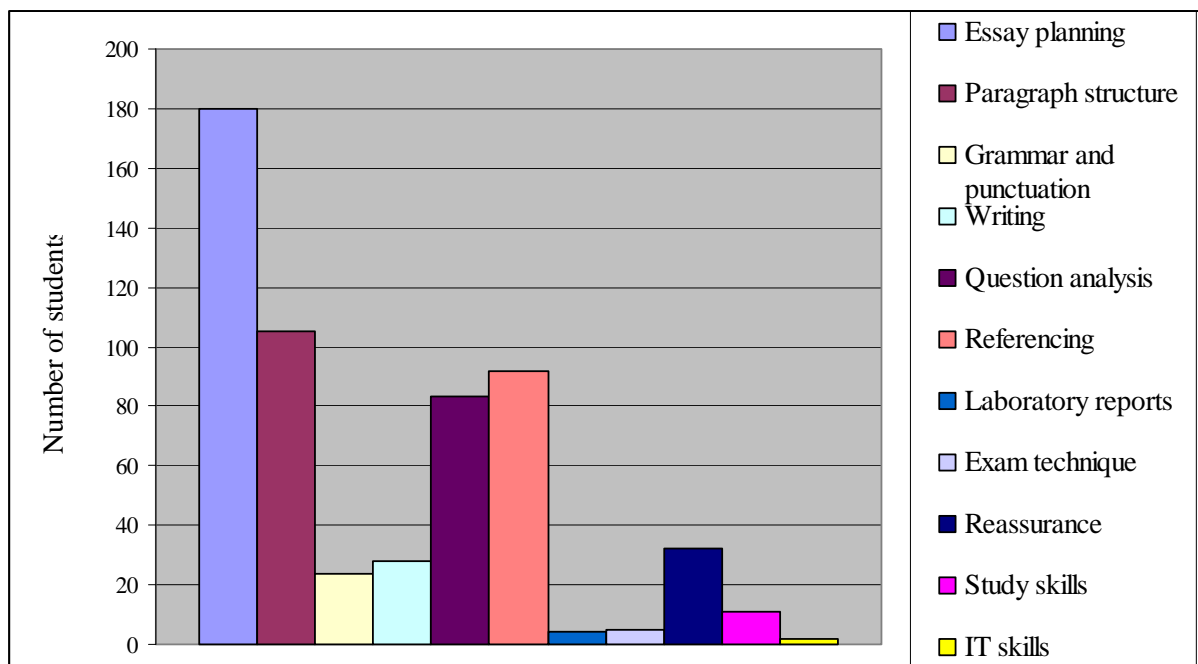


Figure 1: Categories of issues experienced by students attending appointments

Of the remaining categories, 32 students (12%) required reassurance about their first assignment. Students in this category were often mature aged or had experienced a significant break for study. In the words of one such student she *'wanted to ensure [her] work was of University standard'*. Less than 5% of students were recorded as having only one issue. Those specific issues were IT skills, reassurance on their first assignment and two students wanting some assistance in developing skills for working in groups (classified in the study skills category).

Phase 3

Fifty-seven students responded to the survey, representing a return rate of 21% of the total students attending the appointments. The respondents were drawn from all three campuses as well as from four students who had appointments through telephone and videoconference from a remote campus. The majority of respondents were studying first year units (64%) followed by those studying second year units (26%) with the remainder made up of equally of third year and postgraduate students. Interestingly, 44% of first year respondents had either continued on from study or had less than a 3-year break between commencing university and other study. At the other end of the spectrum, 40% had a break of over 11 years from formal study, with 26% having a break of over 20 years. Of those returning the evaluative survey, three-quarters were female and 23% from a non-English speaking background.

The opening question on the survey sought a response to the generic question "Why did you seek help with your studies?" This was answered by all respondents, with responses falling into the categories detailed in Table 1.

Table 1: Reasons students sought help with their studies

Category of response	Number	Representative comment
Writing essays	20	<i>My essay writing needed improvement, also my interpretation of essay questions</i>
Reassurance	9	<i>Because I was new to university and I was unsure if I was doing the right thing on my assignment. So I was seeking advise [sic], encouragement and support</i>
Writing generally	3	<i>Academic writing skills - no knowledge</i>
Grammar and punctuation	4	<i>I needed help to improve and correct my grammar and writing skill with my essays.</i>
Clarification of assignments	5	<i>Clarify assessment instructions/task</i>
Improve academic skills (general)	3	<i>To enable me to write at a university academic level, and to learn new skills.</i>
Improve results	5	<i>To improve my grades; from credit and pass to distinction.</i>
Referencing	6	<i>Couldn't figure out referencing</i>
English as a second language	3	<i>Due to English Writing style different from Chinese writing.</i>
General	7	<i>Because I have no support and struggling for living in general. I felt very comfortable discussing my learning difficulties with [lecturer], and requesting help. [Lecturer] is a very warm, professional, and effective teacher, I believe she has a great humanist approach with an emphasis on meta-cognition</i>

The respondents were then asked to indicate specific areas of academic need (“Which of the following best describes the area of academic skills you most need(ed) support with?”), marked against a pre-determined list. They were able to select more than one option. Grammar/punctuation and writing style was the most common answer (selected by 66% of the respondents) with essay-related assistance also very high (Table 2).

Table 2: Areas of academic skills that students identified as causing issues

<i>Answer Options</i>	Response Percent	Response Count
Analysing an essay/assignment question	46.4%	26
Essay planning	53.6%	30
Essay structure/forming a logical argument	60.7%	34
Paragraph structure	28.6%	16
Grammar / punctuation / writing style	66.1%	37
Other types of writing (scientific reports, reflective writing, bibliographies, etc)	25.0%	14
Referencing	39.3%	22
Reading/study technique	10.7%	6
Exam technique	12.5%	7
Other (please specify)	5.4%	3

In terms of student perceptions of the appointments, they were asked to rate on a Likert scale (5 - strongly agree, to 1 – strongly disagree) their agreement with the following statements (shown here with the mean score)

Overall I found the appointment to be helpful	4.3
The appointment gave me some ideas or strategies for further studies	4.3
I would recommend this method of support for others	4.5

When asked how the students found out about the learning support appointments, the majority (37%) indicated this was through a lecturer or tutor, with Student Advisors (16%), friends (19%), general advertising (11%) and Counsellors (9%) being other commonly cited sources of information.

At the conclusion of the survey, there was opportunity to give open ended comments and 34 students (60%) recorded responses. None of these comments were negative, and the majority indicated that the support had been valuable, and the staff approachable for example:

I chose to make use of support sessions before any big issues arose which helped reduce stress levels. I appreciate the help, thank you.

The staff were very approachable, there was no feeling 'silly' for having to seek assistance.

I am ok with English, it is just few mistakes which I sometimes seek help [sic]. I still recommend this service to the incoming students whether from English speaking background or non-English speaking background.

Whilst a number indicated that the support was of use, there were some students who indicated that the support played a critical role in their persisting with tertiary studies:

All the support programmes offered by utas have been helpful, without these supports I may have dropped out.

Not unexpectedly, there were also students who indicated that they had not immediately been aware of the support provided:

Uni does offer a lot of support and information. Finding it sometimes is the difficult part.

Discussion

Krause (2006) asserts that the rhetoric around the ‘first year experience’ can contribute to a misconception that the first year experience is a homogeneous one. Accordingly she advocates for a consideration of the needs of different equity groups, in terms of engagement and support through the transition phase. The provision of individual appointments allows for each to be tailored to specific needs of students, and hence can cater very well for individual differences. The appointments often meet ‘just in time needs’ and are contextually based and relevant to the

student. The overwhelmingly positive response to the appointments by students supports the effectiveness of this as a strategy at UTAS. Moving away from the academic dimension, it appears from student comments that the appointments also fulfilled some of the 'personal' needs (Tinto, 1987) in particular for reassurance in a time of transition.

These results clearly demonstrate that students who self-report issues in their academic literacy come from a broad range of backgrounds and experience. Perhaps surprisingly, they include those coming through the traditional senior secondary background into university, as well as those entering after a break or from a non-traditional background. Nevertheless, whilst students attended the appointments for a diversity of reasons, there was a significant proportion attending who were at academic risk. The self-identification aspect of the appointments was interesting in this regard. It cannot be assumed, and is almost certainly not the case, that students attending individual student appointments are the only students who could benefit from this program. Nor can it be assumed that all the students attending needed the same level of support. A proportion of students needed, and were provided (at the discretion of the Student Learning staff), with additional appointments beyond the usual two appointments per semester offered to students. Recognising that by no means all 'at risk' students availed themselves of the individual appointments, (including some who had been advised to do so by their lecturers) this appears to be an area for further development. These findings can be further informed by the literature, looking at "adaptive" and "non-adaptive" help seeking behaviors of students (see for example, Alexitch, 2002). The former group is more likely to actively engage supplementary assistance in order to become more independent learners; the latter being less likely to seek assistance and therefore missing key opportunities for skill development. Kuh and co-workers (2006) see 'early warning systems to identify and support students at academic risk' (p 60) as a valuable strategy in student support. Clearly the current UTAS system has further to go in this regard, however the recent appointments of student advisors to be a first contact point for at risk students appears to be a step in the right direction.

The limitations of a system of self-reporting may also extend to whether or not students from particular equity groups were able to identify areas in which they need assistance, or indeed felt comfortable with seeking assistance. The research of Krause and co-workers (Krause, 2006; Krause et al. 2005) indicates that whilst both students from low SES backgrounds and those from overseas were more likely to report having some difficulty with their study, they were not as likely to seek assistance from staff as mature aged students. Interestingly, the work of Ballantyne, Todd, and Olm (2007) looking at the first year experience of students at a new campus of the University of Southern Queensland, found in contrast, that students from a low SES background disagreed more strongly than students from high SES that they were experiencing difficulties in their studies. Regardless of possible causes for these findings, the prospect remains that certain equity groups are more likely to either recognise the need for, or to seek help, and therefore may not access the support they need.

Conclusion

From the evidence collected from this evaluation, individual student learning appointments were highly valued by students who attended them, and fulfilled a range of purposes that were by no means exclusively remedial. From the present data, however, it cannot be ascertained if the

appointments had a positive effect on actual student results, and this will be considered for future evaluations. Nevertheless, there was some evidence in the student evaluations that the appointments influenced students' decisions to persist with tertiary study.

Despite the problematisation of the notion of academic literacy in some of the literature, (see Henderson & Hirst, 2007) it is clear from this evaluation that the 'skills' associated with traditional notions of academic literacy continue to be necessary for tertiary study and are seen to be important by the students. Through individual appointments, notions of contextualisation within discipline areas can, to some degree, be dealt with. Indeed, it could be argued that these are in fact [implicit] learning outcomes of a degree course at this, and most probably all other Australian universities, and as such need to be explicitly addressed in the teaching and learning program.

The emphasis on essay writing, inclusive of analysis of question and referencing, in student appointments supports the continued inclusion of these elements as the basis for the enabling course, UniStart, that is also offered by the Centre prior to the start of each Semester and through targeted workshops into Schools. Although such an embedding approach may be more consistent with a broader perspective on academic literacies, it appears that there remain students who appreciate the opportunity for, or require, individualised support in this area. Furthermore, it appears that this type of support, through personal contact, is highly valued.

Whilst this evaluation may be viewed as a positive story, the comments of one student who indicated that the support was great, once it could be located, resonate strongly with the authors. How many students could have taken advantage of these appointments (or other student learning initiatives) and were not aware that they existed? The challenge for those of us working in the area of student learning is to ensure, not only that we offer a suite of support for the diversity of student needs, but that we communicate clearly and early to students about how we can support them.

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