

## **I am not alone! A reflective activity for first year students**

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### ***Abstract***

*Identifying students at risk based solely on academic performance may not be a true indicator of those who are not engaged with the institution and are at risk of discontinuing. Many other factors can influence whether a student continues and completes their degree. Embedded in the tutorial program of a very large Biology class is a Reflective Activity delivered at week 4 which allows a student to anonymously reflect on University so far and offers support from a wide range of support personnel and facilities to address a concern the student may identify. The activity was trialed in 2010 and went live to the 1856 first year Biology students in 2011*

### **Introduction**

Student engagement, defined as students' involvement with activities and conditions likely to generate high-quality learning, is increasingly understood to be important for higher education quality. (ACER, 2008) All aspects of engagement have a strong positive relationship with a range of general, specific, social, personal, ethical and interpersonal capabilities. (2007 Australasian Survey Student engagement AUSSE data) Many other studies have also discussed the importance of a student's engagement with their institution. (Tinto 2009a; Tinto 2009b; James, Krause and Jennings 2010).

In the first year Biology course at the University of Melbourne there is both formative and summative assessment. A student's academic performance is monitored and students are contacted if they are perceived to be at risk. They receive advice about how to seek academic support. However as Tinto (2009a) points out despite a successful academic performance, adjustment difficulties, goals, commitments, finances, fit (belonging socially or academically), involvement and learning, are reasons for the majority of voluntary departures. Social support, frequent feedback about their learning, and actively involving students with other students and staff in relevant learning, in particular in the classrooms, laboratories, and tutorials, will ensure students are more likely to learn and persist. (Tinto, 2009a)

The tutorial program in first year Biology provides a learning environment in which students can engage with each other. It provides a forum in which reflection of their transition to University can be discussed.

In 2009 a reflective questionnaire for first year Biology students, the initiative of a tutor who recognized students had many challenges apart from academic issues in their transition to University, was prepared. The 'Reflective Activity' aimed at first year Biology students at The University of Melbourne was developed initially as a brief, anonymous in-class activity, to be completed by students in their fourth week of semester. It was intended to offer them a chance to reflect on how their first weeks at University had

progressed and assess their own performance against their expectations. Most importantly it was to inform students that it was not uncommon to feel lost or disappointed or to be harboring doubts about their choices and it acknowledged the challenges that students face in their first year at university (Krause 2005). It also alerted students to some of the wide variety of resources available to help them.

The paper-based questionnaire was delivered to a subset of the group of 1200 Biology students. The questionnaire focused on aspects of University life and asked students to rate their experience. The information was not collected but on the same sheet was a list of support services at the University which students could access if their answers highlighted an issue. This was well received by the students who found it interesting to reflect. This early reflection with information about appropriate support, may save some students from feeling completely lost and overwhelmed by the first year experience.

In 2010 funding to support this activity on-line to a broader range of students was made available. The aim of the expanded project was to engage our undergraduates in on-line technologies and at the same time allow them opportunity for self-reflection about their progress and transition into first year (Krause, 2005). Other Universities have developed similar programs (Kirby, 2010). Unlike these, our program the Reflective Activity, is embedded into the tutorial program of first year subjects in Biology and Informatics (with the potential to be delivered across other first year Science subjects). It does not require students to maintain an e-journal. Rather it is a short one-off attempt at reassurance. By going to an on-line format, immediate advice is offered according to the student's specific answer to a question and even more links to University services. The beauty of this is that it can still remain anonymous, be undertaken anywhere, and gives immediate feedback and web links to useful services.

The reflective activity consists of 10 questions, which students could rate from 1, strongly disagree, to 7, strongly agree. Depending on their choice a pop up screen appears that may include a video clip of another student talking about a similar experience they had and what support was out there to assist, or for other questions a popup screen with a link to a the web site of a relevant support service eg. financial aid.

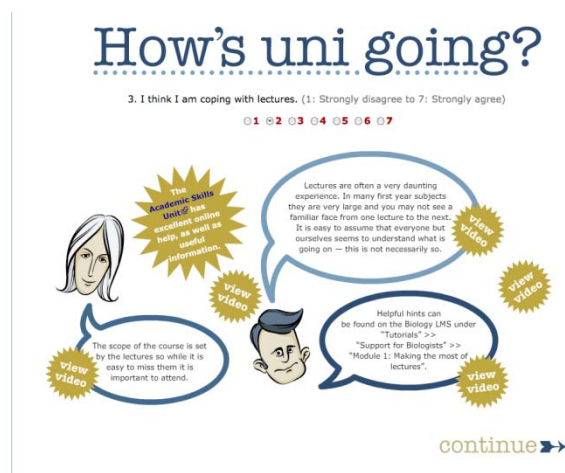
At the end of semester 1 of 2010, an on-line version of the reflective activity was trialed by 30 students from the first year Biology cohort. The majority thought that the on-line Reflective Activity was easy to follow, didn't take too long and the information was not overwhelming. They found the web links were useful and the questions related well to their experience in first semester. They felt the activity would have been useful in first semester around the fourth week.

Interestingly only 5 of the 31 respondents watched the video links embedded in the program. 5 students offered advice about improvements and so following some of their suggestions we 'toned down' the colours. One student's comment was particularly interesting.

*"It would be much more personal if more specific questions were asked. For example, if students scored low in a certain question, eg. 'I think I am coping with lectures.' more specific questions should be asked to understand the reason the student is not coping, and hence, provide a good feedback to the lecturers, tutors, etc. (: ...."*

In the light of the student feedback, modifications to the design of the activity were made. A capture of one of the screens is shown in Figure 1. Note the student has selected 2 so has

identified a problem. The videos to which he/she would have been linked are of second year students relating a similar experience and how they coped with it. The link to the Academic Skills Unit shows a variety of resources available to address this issue.



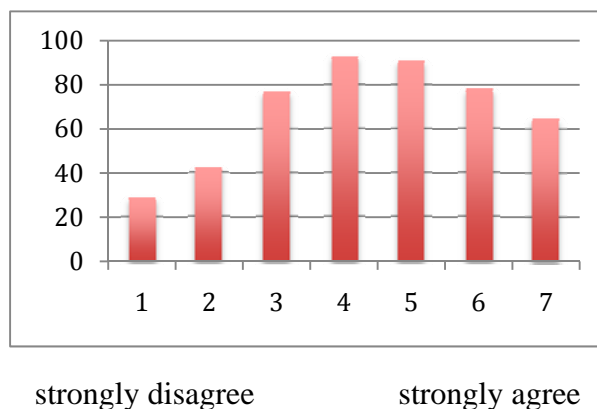
**Figure 1. The window that appears in response to a low score on the statement ‘I think I’m coping with lectures’**

Now that we have opened the activity to our current students the data from this activity provides an interesting profile and some useful feedback about aspects of the course that lecturers, tutors and course designers may find helpful. An interesting piece of data for the teaching staff is shown in Figure 2. Given the importance of Academic staff in student engagement with the University (Krause 2005), the relatively

large proportion of students who are not comfortable speaking to academic staff highlights an area still to be addressed.

**Figure 2. Data showing the distribution of choices for the question ‘I am comfortable speaking to lecturers and tutors’**

In the light of the intended purpose of this Reflective Activity however, a measure of the success of this activity is to determine the access of students to helpful advice via the websites that can put them in touch with the University resources and the reassurance that the students will gain from perhaps understanding they are not alone.



	% respondents semester 2 trial 2010	% respondents semester 1 2011 (all Biology students)	% of total Biology student body 2011 directed to advice
University is better than I expected	50%	55%	14%
I have chosen the right course	31%	26%	7%
I think I am coping with lectures	43%	51%	13%
I think I am coping with tutorials	37%	41%	10%
I think I am coping with laboratory classes	27%	31%	8%
I don't have enough social life	29%	41%	10%
My social life is interfering with my studies.	30%	34%	9%
I am doing better than I expected	69%	79%	20%
I'm comfortable speaking to lecturers and tutors	55%	51%	13%

I need more support with non academic things	19%	21%	5%
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**Table 1 Percentage of students in the trial of 2010 and subject-wide release in 2011, whose low scores directed them to further advice and support services.**

Unfortunately we are unable to determine how many of these students read this advice or watched the videos or used the support services available within the University. However, we hope that the relevant comments from our trial students translate to the student body as a whole, and that students did find the information was useful and related well to their experience.

Most importantly we hope that we have alerted students to the variety of support services and resources that the University offers, the final page of the Activity lists many of the web-links used throughout which can be accessed again by the student in the future.

This activity has been developed in conjunction with Shanton Chang an Information Systems lecturer. With minor modifications, the activity will be available to first year students in this subject too. We would also like to acknowledge the assistance of Nicole Jones and the students who scripted, filmed and edited the video segments.

Depending on the success of the Reflective Activity this semester it may be adapted for all first year science students.

## **Session outline**

### **Introductory activity (10 mins)**

A demonstration of the Reflective Activity

### **Group discussion: (10 mins)**

#### **Area one discussion: Reflection and transition**

- *What positive encouragement do we give students for successfully making the transition to University?*
- *What opportunities are first year students given at your institution to reflect on their progress?*
- *Can this be a course wide reflection or is it possible only subject by subject?*

#### **Area two discussion: Off campus student engagement.**

James, Krauss and Jennings (2010), in their report commissioned by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace training, *The First year Experience in Australian Universities: Findings from 1994 to 2009*. Point out that there has been a decline in the number of hours first year students spend on campus and a corresponding increase in the hours spent on-line for study purposes. At the same time the Australian government has named student engagement as one of four key indicators of the quality of learning and teaching in universities.

- *How do we, as educators, get a student body who is increasingly 'off campus' and 'on line' to engage with our institutions?*
- *How do students at your institutions contact the services provided?*

#### **Area three discussion: Intervention for disengaged students?**

James, Krauss and Jennings (2010), also report that half of our full time, campus based students feel like they don't belong on campus.

- *Students identified as 'at risk' following assessment tasks are often subject to intervention programs. Where can we introduce a 'non-remedial' intervention for students who do not fall into the 'at risk' group but who still may be feeling disengaged?*

### **Presenters and whole group (10 mins)**

Groups report back under the 3 areas for discussion.

### **Where to from here?**

As for students who are at risk, the DEEWAR study (James *et al* 2010) found that over the time from 2004 to 2009, only 'limited inroads' had been made into connecting with highly disengaged students and these students remained an obvious target for intervention.

- *Could our program be refined/extended to identify these students early in semester?*
- *What would be the opportune time in your courses to introduce a reflective activity?*
- *How will we measure the success of this program?*

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