Nothing succeeds like success: Motivating students returning to study to believe in their academic potential

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The authors report on the design, delivery and outcomes of a pre-orientation, whole-of-university outreach seminar for undergraduate first year students returning to study. The seminar targeted students' confidence and desire for self growth together with stress management, academic skills and building social networks. Our approach was underpinned by a collaborative partnership between academic and professional staff. The team applied principles of transition pedagogy together with models of positive psychology that highlighted students' personal resilience and wellbeing.

Introduction

Almost three-quarters of students at the University of Newcastle are 'returners'; that is, 20 years and older. Young adults (20-24 years of age) comprise 46% of undergraduates and mature age students (25 years and over) comprise 35.4%. We welcome the presence of these students and their rich contributions to our learning communities and at the same time recognize the multiplier benefits derived at personal, family and societal levels. In the past, many returning students pursued their degrees following completion of one of the University's long established Foundation Programs. Since the advent of Bradley participation targets, more non-traditional returners are entering via multiple pathways. Easier access has produced a highly diverse cohort whose return to study agenda represents a potential common denominator and point of connection.

Trends across fifteen years of Australian surveys of first year students indicate that returning students require proactive, targeted transition support if they are to maximize their learning potential and sense of well-being while studying. Compared to school leavers, the young adult returner group is more likely to come from lower socio-economic backgrounds and to be first in their families to attend university. Mature age students report a clearer sense of purpose and find teaching and learning enjoyable and satisfying but they are also more likely to study part-time and alone; to be responsible for several dependents and to report feeling stressed. The mature age group describes greater financial strain and more often decide to withdraw from a subject (James, Krause & Jennings, 2010). Generally speaking, the lives of mature age students tend to be more complex than their younger peers. They manage multiple roles, with many financial and emotional demands and report more instances of being under pressure from a range of sources (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005). This is particularly the case for female students in their forties (Ayres & Guilfoyle, 2009).

Clearly, returning students are not a homogeneous group. While returners share many of the same challenges facing school leavers they are also dealing with additional hurdles (Kantanis, 2002). It would seem that the majority approach higher education with higher levels of anxiety than school leavers (Abbott, 2004) and sometimes considerable "trepidation and uncertainty" (Osbourne, Marks & Turner, 2004, p. 311). For example, all sub groups of

returners participating in Osbourne et al.'s survey expressed lack confidence about their return to study except for 'careerists'.

Ayres and Guilfoyle (2009) report that mature age female students perceive that university is primarily geared to the needs of younger students. According to Reason, Terezini and Domingo (2006) if students feel that their university supports them, not only academically but also personally and socially, they will be more likely to gain academic competence, which encourages them to remain at university. Benson, Hewitt, Devos, Crosling, and Heagney (2009) argue that a link between student support and teaching and learning is 'at the heart of the issue'. In *Articulating a Transition Pedagogy*, Kift (2009) also advocates the development of professional-academic partnerships working towards a whole-of-university approach in order to facilitate student transition and engagement and respond effectively to diversity.

Several researchers highlight the necessity for customized transition support for returning students (Abbott-Chapman, Braithwaite & Godfrey, 2004; James et al., 2010; Krause et al., 2005). This includes specific workshops to develop peer networks (Bapty, 2010; Trotter & Roberts, 2006); better access to student support services (Leder & Forgasz, 2004) and proactive outreach for all returners prior to problems arising, with some evidence that non-traditional groups are less likely to contact student support services for assistance (Benson, et al., 2009).

The seminar

The "Back to Study" Seminar was designed as a high quality, pre-orientation program for returning students across all faculties. The Seminar was advertised on the Orientation website and postcards were mailed out to all eligible students. One hundred and ten returning students attended the seminar which was held from 9am-4pm on the Saturday prior to Orientation week. Saturday was chosen as a means of access in response to the reality of students' role demands (Devlin, 2010). Professional and academic staff designed and delivered the seminar with the assistance of fifteen student mentors. Staff involved included academics from the Newcastle School of Law, Student Support Services professionals (Counselling, Disability Support, Student Welfare and Loans), Librarians, Learning Advisors, Student Administration and the Wollotuka Institute. All staff had long experience in teaching or support of first year students, and especially the 'returning' cohort.

The day-long program was based on Lizzio's five senses of success model (Lizzio, 2006) which underpins Newcastle's online transition resource "My Journey" (Kirby, Dluzewska & Scevak, 2010). The program introduced students to the resource itself and offered them structured opportunities to reflect on their sense of purpose, strengths and skills in small groups and to share their expectations and concerns with peers, mentors and staff who were able to offer timely advice. Students also had opportunities to develop connections with peers within their courses and outside course streams as well as to meet and engage with staff across the university. Students received an inspiring address by Katherine Lindsay, Senior Lecturer, Newcastle Law School focusing on the nature of student success. Feedback from students suggested strongly that this general address did reduce their immediate anxieties about their capacity to perform in their chosen courses. The students could nominate to attend up to three afternoon workshops. Workshop topics included mindfulness practice and stress management; three academic skills sessions (Critical Thinking, Essay Writing or Mathematics) and a session on "Succeeding at Uni."

At a process level the seminar was also designed to address the anxieties typically associated with returners' transition. Archer, Cantwell and Burke (1999) have argued for the need to keep anxiety to a manageable level. As Cullity (2007) notes, academic culture has the potential to enthuse or intimidate students returning to study. A space was created for students to feel hopeful and optimist about the prospect of personal and academic success. Cuseo (2010) has noted that student optimism during their first semester may be a more accurate predictor of academic progress than prior academic achievements. A 'strengths-based', resilience approach was adopted in reliance on evidence that students who recognize, use and develop their strengths and skills and proactively build personal resilience are then more likely to achieve their goals and maintain a sense of wellbeing while studying (Govindji & Linley, 2007; Hubert, 2009). Throughout the seminar students were invited to develop meta-awareness in group discussions (Henderson, Noble & De George-Walker, 2009) and to practice reflexivity as a learning tool (Hedberg, 2009). Students were empowered to take charge of their own learning through exercises which explored their learning styles and their level of preparedness to meet key learning challenges. Humour infused some of the experiential exercises in critical thinking and engagement.

Feedback from student participants indicated that the seminar was positively received and effective in achieving its intended objects. Many students commented on feeling less nervous and more confident. For example, "As a result of today I feel less nervous about coming to uni." "I now feel more comfortable." The perceived value of hearing the stories of mentors and other students was clearly articulated. The best thing was hearing from those "who have the same concerns and worries as me" and knowing "I'm not alone." Some students reported that the best thing was the "help I was given with any concerns." Others recognized that they now "have a better understanding of what to expect starting uni." Students also recognized the importance of making peer connections. "The best thing about today was getting to meet others." Some students said that they now have "a better understanding of some useful techniques for studying effectively." Several began to proactively plan their strategies "I will work towards getting group study happening."

Other students commented that they now knew a staff member from Student Support Services. One student noted that the best thing about the seminar was it being "positive." Another wrote "As a result of today I now feel positive about commencing the first year of my degree (coping with the coming challenges)". Several students said they were now looking forward to starting university. One student stated that they now "feel more a part of the university and better equipped to deal with my studies." Some students reported that they now understood that help was available and they knew more about student services. One student suggested organizing mature age students' study groups and contacts in the future. Finally, students made comments such as "Today was a very relaxed and informative introduction to the University," "Today was very helpful and positive as well as inspirational." and "I appreciate the Uni cares enough to organize these kinds of events."

Conclusion

James et al., (2010) identify one of the core, continuing challenges for institutions as the enhancement of the quality of "targeted, pre-enrolment support and information" for students from traditionally underrepresented groups. The "Back to Study" workshop is not a new innovation for the University of Newcastle, but the shift to a partnership approach in 2011 reflects strongly both the impetus of ongoing research in the higher education sector on the need to provide support to the student as a "whole person", and the increasing desire for

professional and academic staff to see their student support and educational roles as complementary. In addition, the model of engagement devised in the Back to Study workshop recognizes and embeds the key element of student role models in the form of enthusiastic student mentors who are also in partnership with staff in supporting new students through sharing experience, networking and reinforcing commencing students' existing strengths and talents. As a learning community we wish to facilitate student success as "a holistic phenomenon that embraces the multiple dimensions of personal development and the multiple goals of higher education" (Cuseo, 2010, p. 3).

Session outline

Whole group discussion (5 minutes): What are your 'returner' demographics? What's been your involvement with students returning to study?
Presenters (10 minutes): Briefly describe the "Back to Study" seminar and share resources.
Small group discussion (10 minutes): What transition supports currently operate for returning students at your campus? How do such initiatives contribute to the success of returning students?
Presenter and whole group discussion (5mins): Summarise themes. What have we learnt? What else could we trial?

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