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Enhancing first year student engagement: collaborative practice in a core business unit

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper, informed by an action research framework, was to evaluate how a collaborative approach between unit facilitators and learning advisors in a first-year core business unit contributes to an environment where students are actively engaged in their learning. Student engagement in their learning is a key priority for university faculties, particularly in first year, as it is a key factor in student performance and persistence in their studies. Using the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement as a benchmark, a mixed-methods approach was adopted using an online survey ($n=171$) and focus groups ($n=17$). Findings indicate that specific cohorts of students benefit from this collaborative learning model, as it encourages students to actively engage in their learning, provides them with early feedback on their performance, encourages self-reflection and provides transferable skills that form the foundation of their future learning. The current study contributes to student engagement literature pertaining to the factors affecting student engagement in higher education. The key lesson learnt is that the future success of embedded learning support relies heavily on building strong relationships between academic and professional staff.

Keywords Higher education, Student engagement, Business, Embedding, Learning support

Background

The concept of student engagement and its impact on student success and retention, particularly in the first year, has been the focus of much research both in Australia and overseas (Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010; Krause & Coates, 2008; Thomas, 2012; Tinto, 2010). Zepke (2013) acknowledges that the notion of student engagement is complex and multi-

dimensional; therefore, strategies to enhance student engagement need to be contextualised to the institution and learners. Krause and Coates (2008) state that while, to a certain extent, engagement is dependent on the effort that students make to actively engage with learning tasks, “institutions are responsible for creating environments that make learning possible, that afford opportunities to learn” (p. 2). To this end, there is an onus on institutions to understand the changing needs of the student cohort and respond to these needs (Thomas, 2012).

A case in point is the considerable change in the student demographic within Australian universities over the past twenty years. There is greater participation by students from low socio-economic backgrounds along with students who are the first in their family to pursue a tertiary qualification, a trend that should continue (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). With the changing demographic has come a growing concern that students who enter higher education may not have the requisite language and academic skills to pursue their studies without appropriate learning support. Furthermore, school leavers appear to struggle with the type of learning required at higher education (Arkoudis & Starfield, 2007; Australian Universities Quality Agency, 2009; Lumsden, McBryde-Wilding, & Rose, 2010; Wingate, 2007). As a result, there is “an increasingly widespread perception ... that the language and literacy skills of [EAL] students ... is in a state of decline” (Murray, 2010, p. 56; see also Arkoudis, Baik, & Richardson, 2012). This is not mere perception as some universities admit to greater numbers of students on academic probation and rising rates of attrition (Peacock, 2008).

In order to address these changes, a number of universities have transformed the manner in which they provide learning support. Traditional approaches, such as generalised workshops where content tends to be dissociated from a student’s discipline (see, for example, Wingate, 2006), are conceded as offering little, if any, transference of skills (Australian Business Deans Council & Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2010)

while also failing to attract those regarded as most requiring the support (Arkoudis & Starfield, 2007; Baik & Grieg, 2009; Song, 2006). In the last decade, a proliferation of studies supports the integration, or embedding, of language and academic skills (LAS) within discipline-based units (for an overview of research, see Harris & Ashton, 2011). In this same period, literature directly related to first year education (FYE) called for “academic, administrative and support programs [to be] integrated into the curriculum as much as possible” (Kift & Nelson, 2005, p. 226).

Underpinning this paper is the idea that student engagement can be enhanced by approaches that are “embedded into mainstream provision to ensure all students participate and benefit from them” (Thomas, 2012, p. 9). These approaches include the provision of a supportive learning environment; positive staff and student interactions; active, collaborative learning strategies; and challenging learning experiences (Zepke & Leach, 2010). The current paper argues that business schools can enhance first year students’ engagement through building collaborative academic-professional partnerships in the design and delivery of units and the provision of integrated learning support. Specifically, the current paper uses the case of a first year core business unit (BES1100) designed to enhance student engagement in the School of Business (SoB) at Edith Cowan University. The purpose of the project was to seek evidence that the collaborative approach adopted in this unit does create an environment where students are actively engaged in their learning.

Stage one was the distribution of an online survey to students enrolled in BES1100 which measured selected variables from the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) including: staff and student interactions; supportive learning environment; higher order thinking; general learning outcomes; and general development outcomes. Stage two was conducting focus groups designed to obtain further insight from students enrolled in BES1100 about the effectiveness of the delivery of the unit and value of embedded learning support.

The Collaborative Approach

In recent years, statistics in the SoB have indicated that retention is below the national benchmark and that the highest attrition occurs in the first year. Therefore, measures to improve student success and retention have been a key priority for the SoB. The Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) indicates that student engagement (six factors measuring *academic challenge, active learning strategies, staff and student interactions, enriching educational experiences, a supportive learning environment* and *work integrated learning*) is linked with high-quality learning outcomes (seven factors measuring *higher order thinking, general learning outcomes, general development outcomes, career readiness, average overall grades, departure intention* and *overall satisfaction*). Kift (2008), in her model for institutional action in supporting first year students, has highlighted the importance of integrating and coordinating activities and developing a more consistent and coherent approach to addressing these factors. To this end, the School's academic staff and the Academic Skills Centre (ASC) staff adopted a team approach to assist students in acquiring key academic skills, which would enhance their chances of success in the unit. Academic staff and ASC Learning Advisors (LAs) worked collaboratively in developing a program of unit-specific, contextualised learning support. The main aim was to link the embedded learning support to key assessment tasks. Performance in assessments is a key indicator of engagement (Thomas, 2012) and early success and feedback helps to motivate students to persist in their studies (Yorke, 2011). Through various strategies such as unpacking the question, authentic examples, modelling, hands-on activities and error analysis, students are provided with the essential tools to complete not only the unit-specific assessment task but also tasks they are likely to face in their future studies and professional careers.

Development and Implementation

In order to target the majority of first year students, core first year units were prioritised for embedding learning support. The unit, *BES1100 Foundations of Business Knowledge*, is a compulsory first year unit. It is part of ECU's Business Edge program, which helps to develop students' employability skills throughout the three-year Bachelor of Business.

ASC LAs deliver three embedded sessions at key points through the semester related to two major assessments, the *Business Edge Email* and the *Personal Effectiveness Project*. The *Business Edge Email* assesses students' communication skills and their ability to address job selection criteria. In week two, LAs conducted a 25-minute interactive and practical session in which they worked with the unit facilitator demonstrating to students how to unpack an assignment question and the steps involved in completing an assignment. This provided an opportunity for students not only to acquire key academic skills but also for "a rapport to be built" with staff, the ASC and other students (Darroch & Rainsbury, 2009, p. 565). Students were given the option to resubmit their paper to improve their mark by attending a minimum of two ASC workshops. This incentive provided targeted assistance early in the semester to those students who were struggling to achieve well. Fifteen per cent of students, most who had failed or scored below 65% in the paper, took up the option to resubmit. All these students improved their grade by at least 10% of the original grade, with several students scoring distinctions and high distinctions. The resubmission process helped students realise the importance of seeking feedback and revising work, as well as helping them to begin assembling the academic skills to approach their future assignments. This reflects Yorke's (2011) view about the "importance of distinguishing between feedback that is specific to the assessed item of work and that which is intended to have transfer-value across cognate study units" (p. 15).

The *Personal Effectiveness Project* was a practical application that required students, in pairs, to complete a 2,500 word business report and an eight minute oral presentation. The embedded support for this assessment was conducted in week nine, the objectives being to reinforce the skill of analysing a task and to teach students how to complete a literature review. Students were introduced to key skills including searching for and evaluating the quality and usefulness of sources, and effective paraphrasing and synthesising sources into a cohesive review. Workshop activities completed in groups allowed students to apply the skills and reinforce their learning.

In addition to the in-class sessions, students had the opportunity to access the full range of learning support offered by the ASC. This included weekly academic skills workshops, assignment labs where students could consult a learning advisor, and individual consultations. The uptake of these services by the BES1100 students increased by approximately 17% (61 students in total) relative to the previous semester, supporting findings by Darroch and Rainsbury (2009) indicating that embedded support increases the visibility of learning advisors and diminishes the stigma often associated with accessing learning support.

Method: Stage One

Stage one used a quantitative method to seek evidence as to whether the collaborative approach enhances student engagement by comparing results of the case study against the Australasian benchmark.

Participants and Procedure

Participants ($N = 171$) were students enrolled in BES1100 in the first year of their business undergraduate degree. The sample comprised predominantly female participants (59%), straight from high school (60%) and enrolled full-time (91%) as a domestic student (87%). On-campus students were invited to participate in the study by completing a voluntary

and anonymous Qualtrics survey during their tutorial. A URL link to the Qualtrics survey, which took approximately five minutes, was uploaded on the unit Blackboard site for the students who wished to complete the survey. The research was approved and met the requirements of the Institution's Human Research Ethics Committee.

Measures

Student engagement and intellectual outcomes were measured using the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE). AUSSE is an “evidence-based quality assessment developed to assist universities enhance educational provision and outcomes” (Coates, 2010, p. 2). The authors selected variables and subsequent items relevant to BES1100 including: *student and staff interactions* (SSI) (level and nature of students' contact with teaching staff), *supportive learning environment* (SLE) (feelings of legitimization within the Business Edge community), *higher order thinking* (HOT) (participation in higher-order forms of thinking), *general learning outcomes* (GLO) (development of general competencies) and *general development outcomes* (GDO) (development of general forms of individual and social development). In addition, sex, enrolment status (domestic/international), study workload (part-time/full-time) and entry pathway (ECU preparation program, school leaver, mature-age, TAFE, portfolio entry) were included as demographic variables. Participants indicated the number of semesters they had been enrolled in the current degree to enable non first-year students to be excluded from the analysis.

Results

Table 1 displays the mean scores of selected engagement and outcome items for first year students enrolled in BES1100 against the first year Australasian benchmark (based on AUSSE data collected November, 2011). The Australasian benchmark represents mean scores of first year students across 24 universities in Australia and New Zealand enrolled in various fields of education (e.g., sciences, IT, health, education and business). As BES1100 is not

being compared against a comparable business-only cohort, the authors accept this as a limitation. Mean comparisons indicate that, excluding ‘quality of relationship with learning advisors’ and ‘using computer and IT’, student ratings of BES1100 predominantly outperformed the Australasian benchmark on student and staff interactions, supporting learning environment, higher order thinking, general learning outcomes and general development outcomes.

Table 1 *First year mean scores against Australasian benchmark*

AUSSE engagement scales and outcome measures	BES1100	Australasian benchmark
Student and Staff Interactions ($\alpha = .78$)		
Discussed grades with teaching staff or LAs	2.0*	1.9
Talked about career plans with teaching staff or LAs	1.8*	1.6
Discussed ideas from your classes with teaching staff or LAs	2.1*	1.7
Received feedback on academic performance	2.8*	2.4
Supportive Learning Environment ($\alpha = .77$)		
Quality of relationship with class peers	5.6*	5.4
Quality of relationship with teaching staff	5.6*	5.2
Quality of relationship with learning advisors	4.6	5.1
Outcomes		
Higher Order Thinking ($\alpha = .81$)		
Analysing basic elements	3.1	3.1
Synthesising and organising ideas	3.3*	2.9
Making judgements about value of information	3.1*	2.9
Applying theories or concepts	3.2*	3.0
General Learning Outcomes ($\alpha = .83$)		
Acquiring job-related knowledge and skills	3.4*	2.9
Writing clearly and effectively	3.0*	2.8
Speaking clearly and effectively	3.4*	2.7
Thinking critically and analytically	3.2*	3.1
Using computer and IT	2.7	2.8
Working effectively with others	3.6*	2.9
Learning effectively on your own	3.0	3.0
General Development Outcomes ($\alpha = .80$)		
Understanding yourself	3.2*	2.6
Understanding people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds	3.0*	2.6
Solving complex, real-world problems	2.9*	2.7
Developing a personal code of values and ethics	3.0*	2.6

* business unit results greater than the first year Australasian benchmark.

Note: SSI items were measured on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 = *never* to 4 = *very often*; SLE items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 = *unfriendly, unsupportive, sense of alienation* to 7 = *friendly, supportive, sense of belonging*; HOT, GLO and GDO items were measured on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 = *very little* to 4 = *very much*.

To further investigate whether demographic factors (sex, study load and enrolment status) were having a confounding effect on the variables, independent samples t-tests were conducted. There were significant differences in the following mean scores, however these effect sizes were small: ‘discussed ideas from your classes with teaching staff or LAs’ was higher for males ($M = 2.23$, $SD = .89$) than females ($M = 2.00$, $SD = .85$; $t(169) = 2.06$, $p < .05$; $\eta^2 = .02$); females indicated BES1100 contributed more to ‘working effectively with others’ ($M = 3.65$, $SD = .52$) than males ($M = 3.44$, $SD = .77$; $t(169) = 1.99$, $p < .05$; $\eta^2 = .02$); part-time students indicated that BES1100 contributed to ‘developing a personal code of values and ethics’ ($M = 3.38$, $SD = .72$) more so than full-time students ($M = 2.91$, $SD = .82$; $t(169) = 2.19$, $p < .05$; $\eta^2 = .03$). Moderate effect sizes were indicated between the following mean scores: females rated the quality of ‘relationships with class peers’ higher ($M = 5.82$, $SD = 1.10$) than males ($M = 5.34$; $SD = 1.31$; $t(169) = 2.60$, $p < .02$; $\eta^2 = .04$); international students indicated that BES1100 contributed to knowledge, skill and personal development in ‘using computer and IT’ ($M = 3.14$, $SD = .94$) higher than domestic students ($M = 2.68$, $SD = .76$; $t(169) = 2.51$, $p < .02$; $\eta^2 = .04$). No other significant differences were reported.

Method: Stage Two

Focus groups: Participants and Procedure

The objective of the focus groups was to obtain “high-quality data in a social context where people can consider their own views in the context of the views of other people” (Patton, 2002, p. 386). Students studying in BES1100 were informed about the nature of the research during class time and invited to participate in a focus group. Participants were offered the chance to win a AU\$50 gift voucher per focus group. Four focus groups were conducted with a total of 17 students. The duration of each focus group was approximately 45 minutes. Table 2 summarises the profile of the participants. Of the domestic students, twelve were born in Australia, one in the USA and one in Britain. The three international students

were all males from Saudi Arabia and had English as an additional language. The majority of the domestic students, particularly mature age students, had experience in the workplace while the international students did not. The focus group facilitator is Australian-born and has worked in universities in Australia for over 14 years. Quotations from students are identified with the letter 'S'.

The focus group questions were designed to gather student attitudes towards the learning activities conducted in the current unit, particularly those delivered by the learning advisors. Several open-ended questions were asked that related to:

- The extent to which the unit challenged and engaged them in learning.
- The extent to which the embedded learning support added value to their learning.
- The ways in which the content and delivery of learning could be improved.

Student responses during the focus groups were audio recorded. Within two days of each focus group, raw data were analysed using qualitative data coding and categorising, to generate themes for comparison across the focus groups (Patton, 2002).

Focus group outcomes

Student and staff interactions

A major theme that emerged from the focus group discussion was the vital role the lecturer plays in engaging students in learning. Students reported that the facilitators of the BES1100 made the learning “*fun and interactive*” ^(S15) and they adopted a variety of learning approaches to address the different learning styles of students. A male, mature age student commented that: “*it is very good teaching; it’s not just a regurgitation of what’s in the textbook – he has the ability to communicate ideas*” ^(S5). The majority of students enjoyed the group work activities, which encouraged interaction and helped them to form relationships with others. One international student stated that “*I made friends with the domestic students and I still communicate with them out of class*” ^(S10). In general, there were very positive

views amongst students in relation to the degree to which learning advisors were considered a core part of the learning experience. However, responses varied according to the age of the student and the students' experience with different learning advisors, both in and outside the classroom.

Mature age students tended to have a more positive perception of learning advisors, making comments, such as *“they add value to the learning experience”* ^(S9) and *“learning from people who are passionate and they know what they are talking about”* ^(S5). These students also regarded learning advisors as *“experts in their field”* ^(S8) who bring their specialist knowledge to assist students. This was mainly described in terms of key academic skills such as referencing, paraphrasing and other generic skills, for example: *“introduces and reviews core academic skills – something that should be done throughout the university experience”* ^(S2).

Female school-leavers, although conceding that learning advisors provide useful help and guidance, tended to regard them as merely an adjunct. *“They’re like a tutor for extra help; it’s good to know that they’re there if you need them”* ^(S13). Comments indicated that the students obtained more value from learning advisors who delivered a short, “punchy” session compared to sessions which were *“too long and boring”* ^(S12).

Students confirmed that they were more likely to access individual assistance from a learning advisor who had provided what was deemed to be effective embedded learning support. For example, three students who had seen the same learning advisor for the email resubmit option commented that *“he helped me restructure what I had already written and I got a better grade”* ^(S3).

Supportive Learning Environment

All students expressed the view that compared to other units, the BES1100 unit provided the most supportive and interactive learning environment. Comments suggested that

the activities designed by the lecturer and learning advisor provided opportunities to practise skills and to engage with other students. *“It was practical, not just giving us PowerPoints; they made it interactive”* ^(S8).

The most positive responses were from mature age and international students who were much more in favour of integrating the learning support. *“Before I heard [the LAs] speaking I thought this is going to be the same boring stuff...but then I realised how important it is”* ^(S8) and *“embedding is the best option, it wouldn’t be the same if it was optional”* ^(S7). The international students in particular valued the support from the learning advisors because it helped them to cope with the difficulties they encountered due to the unfamiliar context. Although they were aware of the generic workshops, they admitted they preferred the embedded support because they were *“a bit lazy”* ^(S13) and reluctant to do extra classes out of class time.

School leavers were less positive and more likely to regard the learning advisor session as taking up valuable class time. These students commented that the session was too long: *“by the time she finished it everyone had zoned out...compared to our other Business Edge moments, it was practically like I was back in a lecture”* ^(S16). The younger students were also less likely to see the learning advisor as a credible source of information about assessment requirements compared to their lecturer. One student recounted a session where conflicting information was presented by the lecturer and learning advisor, leading to confusion: *“it defeated the purpose of the learning advisor being there”* ^(S3). Interestingly, these same students said they would be unlikely to go to a generic skills workshop because it would not be targeted to their needs.

Higher Order Thinking

In general, students responded positively to the impact that the learning advisors had on their ability to think critically about information. This related particularly to the sessions

on unpacking the assignment question and the literature review. *“The learning advisors encourage you to think more about the demands of the question”* ^(S6). One student commented that the learning advisors helped him to *“think about thinking”* ^(S8) and another highlighted the fact they were taught *“how to evaluate sources and select ideas for their purposes”* ^(S9).

General Learning Outcomes

The BES1100 unit was commended by the majority of students as providing transferrable skills relevant to their whole degree and to the workplace. Students agreed that it was necessary for them to acquire the key academic skills to perform well in their discipline-specific units in the first year and beyond. To this end, most of the students commented that the learning advisor helped to clarify the assessment task and highlighted the most important elements on which to focus: *“they help us to unpack the question and tell us exactly what we have to do, tell us the key requirements”* ^(S3). The referencing session, in particular, was welcomed by all students. While some students conceded that they had heard the information before, they valued the *“recap”*. Another student added that it *“solidified and built on previous knowledge”* ^(S9). Older, male students preferred it when the approach used *“was practical and it actually showed you the process and reason”* ^(S9). While most students saw the value of contextualising the support to the discipline, the younger female students were quite adamant that the learning support should focus purely on academic skills rather than content, which they considered to be the exclusive role of the lecturer: *“I felt like she was trying to teach us... I’m happy with [teacher’s name]. He knows the topic and assignment, he’s marking our assignments so I would rather ask him”* ^(S17). The international students commented that the sessions were very useful. *“The learning advisors explained the assessments and made it easier to understand, especially referencing and how to research”* ^(S13).

General Development Outcomes.

A major learning outcome of BES1100 is the development of intrapersonal and interpersonal communication skills. Students rated the unit highly for the encouragement of self-reflection and self-improvement. A key aim of the learning support in BES1100 is to provide students with formative feedback and this was the main objective of the resubmit option for the BES1100 email. All students were supportive of this strategy. They appreciated the fact that it was open to all students, not just those who failed, because *“it is sending a message to students that you can improve.”* ^(S8). The three students in the focus groups who took up the resubmit option were very positive. One female mature age student commented that *“it opens up the door to reflect on what I have done wrong and encourages me to reflect on my strengths and weaknesses.”* ^(S5). A male mature age student stated that *“it provides an incentive to review and excel; for those who failed and improved the sense of failure doesn’t linger. This is particularly important in the first year”* ^(S9).

Discussion

To reiterate, the purpose of the project was to seek evidence that the collaborative approach, adopted in BES1100, creates an environment where students are actively engaged in their learning. The data indicates that the BES1100 unit provides first year students with a learning experience that goes beyond the acquisition of knowledge. The unit provides opportunities for students to develop skills that are transferable to the academic, professional and social context, a key element in student engagement in the first year supported in recent literature (Krause & Coates, 2008). As a core foundation unit in the business degree, the unit attracts a diverse range of students including school leavers, mature age and international students who have English as an additional language. Kift (2008) emphasises that institutions need to “adapt and respond to changing student needs and accommodate known and knowable student diversity, which is writ large in the contemporary massified sector” (p. 5) and research has shown that strategies such as small group discussions can significantly

impact the level of engagement in learning of international students (Soosay, 2009). It is evident from the data that, to a large extent, the learning approaches used in the unit cater to this diversity. A high proportion of students, particularly school leavers and international students, enter university without a thorough understanding of the academic context or the skills (academic, technical and social) necessary for success and this was reflected in comments made by the students. The data supports the view that these students are also the least likely to self-select generic skills workshops (Arkoudis & Starfield, 2007; Baik & Grieg, 2009; Song, 2006). Therefore, the collaborative model adopted in the unit which included the integration of learning support has proved beneficial.

The majority of students rated the supportive learning environment highly and the findings suggest that this was attributed mainly to the unit facilitators' teaching, the rapport developed with students and the learning strategies employed. The international students, more so than domestic students, indicated that BES1100 contributed to knowledge, skill and personal development.

Tinto (2010) talks about the importance of providing core units in the first year that are challenging yet also function as building blocks for the rest of a student's degree. The BES1100 scored highly on the higher order thinking scale. Students commented that they were encouraged to research, evaluate and apply theories. One highly articulate student mentioned the metacognitive nature of the course; it encouraged them to think about thinking and to evaluate knowledge based on how it applies in the 'real world' context.

Many students, particularly male mature age and international, acknowledged the value-adding of the learning advisors and commented that a similar program should be implemented throughout their university course. On the other hand, a significant proportion of students, mainly younger school leavers did not view learning advisors as an intrinsic part of the learning. It is apparent from the data that students still perceive what Peacock (2008)

refers to as a 'disconnect' between the academic staff and the learning advisors. This is exacerbated when the personality, delivery methods and expectations of the discipline lecturer and learning advisor conflict. What is clear, however, is that students who had a positive experience of learning advisors in class were more likely to access support outside class time, a phenomenon supported by the literature (Harris & Ashton, 2011).

Yorke (2011) emphasises the important role that assessment and feedback plays in first year student success and retention. Feedback from all students was that the assessments in the unit, including the personal effectiveness project and resubmit option for the email assignment, encouraged self-reflection and self-improvement, and this contributed to their sense of capability, one of Lizzio's (2006) 'five senses' of successful transition. As a result of the resubmit option, specifically the feedback from LAs, the pass rate for the email assignment improved from 68% to 83%.

The focus on communicative and interactive activities in the unit fosters positive staff and peer relationships which, according to the literature, are vital to engaging students in their studies and creating a sense of connectedness (Lizzio, 2006; Thomas, 2012). This was particularly true for the female students who rated the quality of 'relationships with class peers' higher than male students, and for international students, who valued making friendships with domestic students.

Conclusion

In order to address the changing student demographic and encourage first year students to persist in their studies, this project has found that creating an engaging learning environment can be achieved through the formation of academic and professional partnerships. Although the benchmark used in this research was not business-specific and the data obtained was from a potentially low sample, the results are representative of the student population in the School of Business and of the first year student cohort in many universities.

The students in this study desire learning that is intellectually challenging, socially interactive and based on skills relevant to their future studies and professional career.

It is clear from the data that the academic staff member has the most important influence on the degree to which students are engaged in their learning. This project indicates that students perceive academic staff as having the key responsibility for developing their academic and professional skills. If the academic staff member can establish a strong relationship with students and create a classroom characterised by interactivity and team work, then student engagement is enhanced.

The role and impact of the learning advisors in this collaborative project was more complex and difficult to analyse. The data shows that the relationship between students and learning advisors is lower than that between students and academic staff. According to the focus group responses, this can be attributed to the fact that there persists in younger students in particular a reluctance to accept learning advisors as integral to the learning process. This view is exacerbated when the learning advisors' style is considered lengthy, non-interactive and one that distracts from the main purpose of the class. If embedded learning support is to occur, the preferred approach is a brief outline of key requirements for assessment tasks and a focus on academic skills.

On the other hand, mature age students and those in their second or third year, valued the embedded learning support more highly; these students tended to have a greater insight into the skills they needed to succeed at university and the role that learning advisors play in teaching these skills. Similarly, students who received individual assistance and formative feedback from learning advisors were very positive about their experience, stating they gained more confidence in their ability to perform well. Therefore, the collaboration between academic staff and learning advisors in the provision of embedded learning support increases

the visibility of the learning advisors and this increases the likelihood that students take up more targeted, individualised support.

For practical purposes, this project was limited to an investigation of on-campus delivery of the unit only. The shift towards the off-campus study mode and the need to increase engagement and retention of this cohort requires more analysis and it is intended that future research will take into account ways to enhance learning support in this area also.

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