Concurrent language and academic skills support for international undergraduate medical research students

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Introduction

Advanced Medical Science (AMS) at the University of Melbourne is an intercalated Bachelor of Medical Science that aims to introduce students to careers in academic medicine and encourage the skills required for evidence based practice (Morrison, 2004). It is compulsory for Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery (MBBS) undergraduates at Melbourne University. The third cohort (2003-2004) of students have just completed submissions of their final reports (7,500-10,000 words) based on research within five streams, including clinical research, population health, and laboratory-based research. Among the strengths of the program has been the success of links with international sites and the success of student support. Although previous cohorts have included English as a Second Language and International students, no specific language and academic skills provision was made for them. Recently, through international student exchange programs under the auspices of the university’s international student support program, which has undertaken a range of initiatives since 1996 (Hawthorne, Minas, & Singh, 2004), a concurrent English for Academic Purposes (EAP) lecturer (the author) was appointed specifically for international students. Although remedial language and academic skills (LAS) training for international medicine students has been developed in other universities such as Monash (Sinclair, 2000), the Melbourne University model involves a degree of collaboration between supervisors, AMS teaching staff, students, and the EAP lecturer as academic skills and writing advisor, that appears unprecedented elsewhere.

Innovation

The innovative nature of the support program has developed through the year. The EAP lecturer is involved as a member of AMS teaching staff in the initial orientation program for students, which involves visits to local attractions, and in the three week academic and research skills bridging program that follows this orientation. The bridging program is co-taught by four members of the AMS team and covers language and academic skills training specific to the medical research year, initial training in critical analysis of research.

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articles, and an introduction to statistics and research methods. The particular strength of the bridging program and orientation is the collaborative planning and delivery of academic skills and research training, which is mutually reinforcing in terms of its themes, and the recognition by AMS teaching staff of the integral function of language in the communication of research results. The success of this program has been validated by a survey coordinated by the Faculty Education Unit (FEU). Once students are located at their respective research sites, the EAP lecturer liaises regularly with supervisors, site coordinators, and students during the first semester, to ensure that clear communication about research and academic practices is on-going. Regular meetings with all AMS teaching and administrations staff have also ensured that issues outside of the teaching and academic brief can be dealt with. Through the second semester in the lead up to submission, students submit draft reports to the EAP lecturer, which are commented on in detail and then redistributed to supervisors or other AMS staff for a critical review of content. Qualitative student evaluations of the support received and their experience overall are currently being completed. In addition to explicit acknowledgements in final reports, these evaluations have revealed a good level of satisfaction with the EAP support role and input.

**Evaluation method**

The bridging program and preliminary visits were evaluated using a survey form specifically developed in consultation with the FEU. Qualitative comments from students and acknowledgements in final reports, albeit ‘interested’, have also demonstrated the success of the EAP support and other research support received. Individual interviews with the international student cohort are currently being completed and results to date have reinforced the generally perceived success of this concurrent support initiative.

**Outcomes**

The EAP sessions specifically were very positively evaluated across the seven categories of questions included in the bridging program, averaging around 4/5 although given the small number of respondents (n=31/35) no generalisations can be made. One weakness identified in the survey was the degree of feedback on student progress (3.2), which will be addressed in following sessions. Given also that this was the first time the bridging program has been taught in this format, the feedback - albeit very positive in general - has pointed to specific modifications that are currently being implemented.

**What next?**

Student and faculty evaluations of the program have resulted in changes to the program towards even more explicit guidance of students through semester one. This particular innovation at Melbourne University offers a model of concurrent support that could be emulated in other university settings. Further quantitative and qualitative curriculum research is being planned to better describe and evaluate the program for the future; such research is currently under-represented in the literature.
References


Sinclair A (2000, November 27-28) When I say ‘describe’ I don’t mean that you should just describe. Paper presented at the 3rd Annual Language and Academic Skills Conference, Latrobe University, Melbourne VIC.