Addressing the transition needs of coursework post-graduate students

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the implementation of a transition program for Graduate Diploma students in the Information Technology (IT) discipline. These students were experiencing their first year of higher education in several years, or their first year in higher education in a new country. The program was implemented to cater for a mid-year intake of full-time on-campus students consisting mainly of international students, and a smaller number of part-time local students (a total cohort of 50). This prototype program was closely based on an undergraduate transition program instituted at a neighbouring university. The outcome of implementing a program devised for undergraduates on postgraduates has led to the conclusion that mature students require a different type of transition program. Their need for weekly study groups declines as the semester progresses due to their greater ability to network within their classes and lectures. Interestingly the establishment of an electronic forum was not widely used by these IT students.

Introduction

Research into transition shows that if students have a smooth start to their course there are increased chances of a lower drop-out rate and better results are achieved. The identity of belonging to a cohesive group with provision of a support network leads to increased student success (Gardner 2001, Tinto 1998). This program was implemented as a direct outcome of earlier research and an invitation to attend an undergraduate transition program at a neighbouring university. The IT Grad Dip Transition program as it was named, was implemented as a strategy to enable postgraduate coursework students to achieve their best possible learning outcomes.

This program was instituted in the School of Information Technology at an Australian University with an intake of coursework postgraduate students of almost 50% the total student intake annually. The School already ran an introductory program for these students, who were generally new to Information Technology (IT). The preparatory program consisted of delivering a core body of knowledge over three 3 hour sessions prior to the start of semester. The preparatory program was provided because most of the students entering the course have degrees in areas other than computing, and it could not be assumed that they were familiar with the hardware, some software, logic and terminology needed for the IT Graduate Diploma course. It also served as a way for students to meet each other, although this was not a primary aim. The preparatory program was free to all newly enrolled students.

The IT Grad Dip Transition program addressed learning skills, rather than IT skills. It was also an important vehicle to create early links with faculty and staff. One of the initial aims of a successful learning environment is to set up study groups, in a caring environment, which was another of the program’s aims. Students currently enrolled in the Masters level course were employed as mentors in the program, timetabled to meet weekly with the students in small study groups.
In implementing the program, it was assumed that postgraduate students would have similar transition issues to undergraduates, such as confusion and isolation. The program was based on a similar program implemented at a neighbouring university, the *Science 101 Transition* program (Gleeson 2000). It was also important that the *IT Grad Dip Transition* program promoted a feeling that the university cared. Speculation about why some adult students succeed and persist in tertiary study refers to their need to feel that they matter. “Research has shown that the feeling of mattering keeps adult students engaged in learning” (Schlossberg & Warren cited in Gardner 2001).

The first session of the program emphasised the School’s commitment to the program, the fact that it was offered to students as another subject, non-compulsory and of course free of any fees, in an attempt to further stress the point that these students “mattered” to the School.

**Preparation**

Visits were made to the *Science 101 Transition* program in operation, and discussions were held with key staff involved in that program. Activities from the *Science 101* program were adopted for the *IT Grad Dip Transition* program, such as a “mock” trial lecture, use of a learning styles survey, and division of study groups according to major. Many of the students enrolling in the Graduate Diploma program were returning to study after a break, or had completed their undergraduate degree in a different country, and therefore had different expectations of what the course involved, and what studying at an Australian university involved. The Head of School was very keen to implement the program in a short time span, and quickly moved approval for the subject through the necessary committees. While the final program was given a subject code equivalent to all other courses in the degree, it was not supported with points value, and therefore not assessable. The course code and lecture time was included in the individual timetables of students to give the impression that it was a compulsory part of their degree, when indeed it was not. The program was financially supported via a budget code number for incidental expenses (publishing, guest speaker costs), payment for mentors at tutor rates, and time included in staff teaching allotments.

**Implementation**

Two structured lectures started off the program, one in the official orientation period (one week prior to the start of classes), and one in the first week of semester. In the first lecture the “mock” (trial) lecture activity was conducted and students were given instruction on how to take lecture notes and revise them. Opportunity was provided for them to compare their note-taking ability in small groups and discuss what style suited them best. The homework between lecture one and two had two aims, firstly getting the students to log into the university’s electronic learning management system, and secondly complete a survey to evaluate their own style of learning (Felder & Solomon 2002). In the second lecture a guest motivational speaker discussed these learning styles and offered strategies for accommodating them to fit university delivery format of lecture, laboratory and tutorial. In the second week of semester the study groups were formed and ran for the rest of the semester under the guidance of the current Masters level students. Each group consisted of less than ten students and were assigned a meeting venue and timeslot.

To guide the study groups in the initial sessions, two activities were set. The first was an orientation type research activity reinforcing where key people were located in the university; such as where is the School of IT office; who to contact if illness prevents attendance at a compulsory assessment activity; where to get specific English language assistance. The
second activity was based around plagiarism. Students evaluated four scenarios in groups and decided which constituted plagiarism and which did not. This was followed by a clear definition of plagiarism, the university policy regarding plagiarism and finished with advice on paraphrasing, citing and preferred referencing style used by the School. The plagiarism activity was implemented at a direct request from the Head of School because it had been observed that this was a confusing issue for many of the students.

While no attendance list was officially kept it was obvious that attendance was declining week by week. Consultation with the mentors who reported reduced numbers resulted in a rationalisation. After four weeks of study groups (half-way into the semester) the groups were combined to one in one location, and the number of mentors reduced from five to two, one male and one female.

The electronic forum that had been set up on an internal website accessed by all new Graduate Diploma students via the learning management system used in core subject delivery attracted very little traffic. After four weeks, it had been accessed by only one-third of the students and comments posted by only five out of the fifty newly enrolled Graduate Diploma students. It attracted few further comments during the rest of the semester.

**Feedback from students**

A meeting was held with all students still attending the study groups at the end of the session in Week 5 to provide a forum for feedback. Discussion focussed on the inflexibility of the timetabled study group sessions. Students did not want to attend university early in the day (the sessions were held at 11.30am on Mondays) if they did not have classes until later in the afternoon. It was suggested that groups should decide in their first meeting what is the best timeslot to meet on a regular basis. It was acknowledged that educationally this would be the best option, but would create administrative problems with room bookings in certain timeslots. Students also commented that some of their peers discontinued attending as soon as they realised the subject was non-compulsory and non-assessable. They suggested including a points value and assessable tasks in to the program. The pressure of part-time work, other subjects’ assignments and study requirements, family and other commitments took precedence over study group meetings. The absent students either had formed their own study communities early or did not see the relevance of them.

Towards the end of semester, a survey was mailed to the Graduate Diploma students. The survey was structured in three parts. The first section elicited opinions on the whole program using a five point Likert scale (Strongly agree, Agree, Unsure, Disagree and Strongly disagree); the second part used the same format but the statements were related to the study group sessions; and the third section provided an area for adding any further comments.

Of the fifty new students, fifteen responses were received. While this is too few for a statistical analysis, certain trends emerged.

The strongest positive responses were in agreement for the following statements, indicating an appreciation of the program.

*Participation the IT Grad Dip Transition program has:*

- Given me more confidence with my study at University level.
- Helped me develop better lecture skills.
• Helped me develop better study skills
• Enabled adaptation to the university environment
• Been a friendly experience

The largest neutral responses were evident in the responses to the following statements.

**Participation the IT Grad Dip Transition program has:**
• Given me greater confidence to seek out help from within the School of Information Technology and the lecturers.
• Been a worthwhile experience

The most negative responses were in response to the following:

**Participation the IT Grad Dip Transition program has:**
• Helped me attain better results

Keeping in mind that this is a very small sample, it can be surmised that the students who responded and participated in the program felt it was a friendly experience. The program helped them adapt to the university by developing their lecture and study skills and gave them confidence in the new environment. Students did not feel that the program contributed to their confidence to seek assistance from lecturers. This response needs further investigation in future programs but could be related to the fact that many of the students were in their mid to late twenties, closer in age to the academic staff, therefore do not experience hesitation in communicating with them to the same extent that undergraduates may.

The second section of the questionnaire related to the Study Groups. The responses were most positive to the statement that “My study group has helped me work through the problems given in the course” and “My study group has helped me share resources for subjects”. There were neutral responses to statements about how the study group has helped students survive their first semester, prepare for assignments and develop lecture notes. This mixed and sometimes contrary response to statements, while coming from less than 30% of the students, appeared to support the program was providing friendly experience and sometimes useful information and advice, but not overwhelmingly so.

The last part of the survey allowed students to provide “Tips for improving the program”. The majority of these suggestions were of a positive nature. Students valued the role that the Masters students played in the program, and the chance to meet other new Graduate Diploma students. They particularly valued the two initial lectures on note-taking skills and learning styles, and the referencing activity, but would have like more on course information (pre-requisites, co-requisite subjects etc), and more information on the university policies. The students suggested that the length of the program could be shortened to three or four lecture sessions, and study groups terminated after week five or six. The inflexibility of the timetable was mentioned.

“Inconvenient time, e.g. the program takes place on Monday in which I have no class on Monday (sic)”.

A comment from an international student summed up the usefulness of this prototype program.
It was very evident that our way of learning is very different to learning and study skills in Australia. It is good to know what is expected from the students at the beginning to keep better focussed of (sic) things.

Feedback from mentors

There were five mentors initially involved in the program, and feedback from them was verbal and informal, apart from one e-mail communication. Their verbal comments related to the expectations of the program, both their own and those of the students. They commented that in some cases the students expected them to be tutors, rather than mentors, and did not understand the concept of the “study group” to exchange ideas and discuss problems across all subject areas. It was noted that many of the students had their own networks already established, particularly the international students. They all observed a decline in numbers, over the first three weeks of the study groups, in one group ten students attended in the first week, eight in the second week and only four in the third (week five of semester). Students had arrived at the first session with none of the transition homework completed; a few completed the second week’s activities and by the third week, the discussion was dominated by assignments. There was a commonality in all groups with the need for help with assignments in the more technical subjects. The mentors also mentioned the problem with the rigid timetabling of sessions.

The study groups were timetabled for Monday mornings at 11.30am. Some feedback from students were that it did not abut on any core class and students were not inclined to attend university for a one hour non-compulsory session. (Comment from mentor)

One other point mentioned by the mentors was that the students perceived the transition lectures as part of orientation activities, and did not realise the importance or relevance of the on-going study groups throughout the semester.

Conclusion

An adult learner brings many of their own ideas and experiences into learning situations.

The adult learner is at the same time independent and dependent, motivated and distracted by multiple responsibilities, and rich in life experience. (Kinshuk 2002)

The IT Grad Dip program in its first iteration confirmed that postgraduate coursework students have different transitional needs and requirements to undergraduate students. Once familiar with university, adult students tend to establish their own informal study groups to suit their own schedules, or manage independently. The need for engagement either in formal or informal groups is overshadowed by the many demands on their time (e.g. family responsibilities, part-time or full-time work etc.). Any program must offer practical skills enhancement (e.g. taking study notes, report writing pointers) rather than less structured discussion, reflection or general topics. These students are busy people, even when they are full-time on-campus students, they need a program that provides obvious benefit or they will not attend.

The effectiveness of regular study groups for the postgraduate coursework students is still in doubt. In total than 20% of the new Graduate Diploma students enrolled, attended for longer than a few weeks. The disengagement of students in current times as observed by educational researchers (Astin 1998, Kuh 2001, McInnis 2001) obviously applies to coursework postgraduate students to the same extent as undergraduate students, usually because of the pressure of part-time work and family commitments. The IT Grad Dip program has been
modified in its second iteration, in an attempt to accommodate the time and needs of students, while not compromising its potential effectiveness.

The second iteration

The program is currently in its second iteration, incorporating some but not all of the recommended changes. There are still workload and timetable issues, as well as a lack of administrative staff support. To address the issue of students confusing the program with orientation activities, lectures were not started until the first week of semester, the same as all the academic subjects. The number of lectures was doubled from two to four, three in the first three weeks of semester and the fourth in week 10. The first lecture was in the same format as the first iteration of the program, the second lecture addressed the learning styles and included the plagiarism scenarios and discussion. This activity was moved from a study group activity to the lecture because of its importance. The better attendance at lectures was seen as the best way to get the information across to the largest number of students. The third lecture covered academic writing, reading for writing tips as well as report writing and referencing recommendations. The inclusion of the fourth lecture in week 10 of semester was introduced as an opportunity to bring the group back together, as well as deliver some pointers on how to prepare for the exams and deliver administrative information about the examinations. The program was terminated after this last lecture.

After taking into account both student and mentor comments about the inflexibility of the timetabled study groups, they were scheduled for four different timeslots in the second iteration of the program. Students were able to self-assign themselves to the groups at the end of the second lecture. One mentor was employed to attend all the study group sessions, in a bid to provide some commonality across the groups. The second iteration of the program is currently under evaluation. Initial responses for the lectures were good, and well attended, the study group responses are yet to be submitted.

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References


