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A Pipe Dream? Cost-effective support for enabling students studying online

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Enabling programs and online learning are two key tools for meeting the Federal Government's agenda of widening and increasing participation in higher education in Australia. When the two are combined, however, the results are often poor with many enabling students lacking the fundamental study-skills required to operate successfully in the online environment. Providing effective and targeted support for such students in tight University budgetary environments can also be challenging. This paper looks at some preliminary findings from a small pilot program in Tasmania, where community volunteers were recruited to mentor enabling students through their first encounter with higher education. Early indications from this pilot are that the provision of community volunteer mentors does have the capacity to provide efficient and effective support for this cohort.

Skilled and educated workers are increasingly seen as pivotal to economic success in the global knowledge economy (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2007) and universities, in turn, are seen as crucial in providing this resource (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, p. xi). Federal government currently has in place targets to increase the number of 25-34 year olds with a Bachelor's degree from 29% to 40% by 2040 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, p. xiv). In addition to these economic drivers, social justice has been a significant force in recent Australian government higher education policy, as reflected in the goal to increase participation in higher education for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds from its current static level of 15% to 20% by 2020 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, p. xiv).

To achieve these targets students from non-traditional backgrounds need to be increasingly encouraged into higher education, (Dawson, Chapman & Kilpatrick, 2013, p. 2). Whilst the higher education system has expanded significantly in the past 50 years, this expansion has not led to a greater representation of students from these backgrounds (Gale & Tanter, 2012, p. 42), suggesting that new ways of attracting and supporting these students need to be explored.

One widely-adopted approach to encouraging non-traditional learners into higher education is the provision of 'in-reach programs' (Osborne, 2003), commonly in the form of university enabling or preparatory programs. Such programs now run in the majority of Australian universities and the University of Tasmania's (UTAS) University Preparation Program (UPP) is an example of this approach. Historically, distance education has also been viewed as an important vehicle for providing opportunity to students unable to study on-campus, with online learning in particular seen as having

the capacity to both revolutionise and democratise higher education (Power and Gould-Merven, 2011).

A combination of these two strategies should, in theory, offer significant opportunity for non-traditional students unable to access on-campus delivery because of time, place, mobility and other barriers. However, whilst online learning has long held out substantial promise in bridging these barriers, to-date this promise remains largely undelivered (Simpson, 2004). New barriers have emerged to replace old (Carr-Chellman, 2006) and retention and success rates lag significantly behind those of traditional on-campus students (Simpson, 2004). This lack of success is reflected in the online provision of the University Preparation Program where students enrolled in online mode are up to 50% more likely not to complete or to fail and up to 30% more likely to withdraw when compared to their on-campus counterparts (UTAS, 2011).

A range of support mechanisms could be provided if financial resources were unlimited, however, the reality is they are not. Enabling programs are typically funded to a much lesser extent than undergraduate or post-graduate courses. Solutions to the issue of providing suitable support for students studying online must therefore be cost-effective and sustainable with current budgetary boundaries.

This paper looks at preliminary findings from a small pilot program in Tasmania where community volunteers were recruited to mentor online UPP students through their first encounter with higher education as a way of addressing the above challenges. Whilst there are a number of avenues that warrant investigation from this pilot, including the logistics of managing a community collaboration and the recruitment, training and management of volunteers, this paper will concentrate on the fundamental question that needs to be answered before anything else: that is, can a volunteer mentor program make a difference?

Background

As there are few studies into the efficacy of online learning in university enabling courses, research which concentrates on the undergraduate experience must be used to identify factors which are most likely to influence success. Owens, Hardcastle and Richardson's study (2009) highlight that key barriers for students in remote areas studying online were feelings of isolation, missing face-to-face contact with staff, and lacking the confidence to manage the technology of online learning. This is confirmed in Bolliger and Martindale (2004), whose survey of key success factors in online learning found the following to be most significant:

- Timely and effective interaction with instructors, including assessment feedback;
- Participation in communication both with teaching staff and other students;
- Access to reliable and familiar technology, including appropriate internet access;
- Learning environments in which social interaction and collaboration is allowed and encouraged; and

- Students' motivation, organisation and commitment.

Given that many students in preparatory course already have lower skill levels and need more support than undergraduate students, these issues are likely to be amplified in this group. Whilst there has been a level of acceptance of the inability of online learning to deliver outcomes equitable to an on-campus experience, new research is emerging to indicate that targeted support can increase chances of student success. The more proactive and sustained interventions are, the greater the benefit (Simpson, 2004; Gibbs, Regan & Simpson, 2006-7).

Dhillon's study (2004) provides a useful model for exploring what this proactive support might look like. Students in the Black Country, UK, a region containing significant pockets of social and economic deprivation, studied preparatory subjects online but did a significant proportion of this study at local Learndirect Centres and were provided supplementary mentorial support. The study found that whilst some learners enjoyed studying by themselves, the majority preferred the more social and supportive environment of groups. They also benefited greatly from the additional support provided by mentors and learning advisors over and above that which was provided online. Existing Peer Support models of mentoring on-campus students have also shown that well trained and supported volunteers are an excellent and cost-effective way of providing additional academic support to students (Skalicky, 2010).

The pilot

A collaborative pilot between the UTAS' University Preparation Program and Learning Information Network Centres (LINC) Tasmania was undertaken in semester 1 (Feb-May), 2013 to provide support for online UPP students via volunteer Learning Support mentors.

LINC Tasmania is a state government organisation which provides a combination of services via 71 service delivery centres around Tasmania. The pilot sought to utilise key strengths of LINC Tasmania's regional centres to augment the delivery of two UPP units – UPP010 Study Skills and UPP050 Using Technology. These LINC 'strengths' include their geographic reach, the provision of up-to-date computer technology and high-speed internet access, their access into the local community, their body of existing volunteers and their experience of working with volunteers. The chosen units are basic introductory units which provide students with essential skills for managing university-level study and which have content generic enough to be supported by volunteers.

The three sites chosen for the pilot represent significant pockets of disadvantage in Tasmania. Bridgewater, whilst located little more than 30-40 minutes from Hobart, is dominated by high levels of public housing, is Tasmania's most disadvantaged community, and the fifth most disadvantaged community in Australia (Flanagan, 2010). Queenstown, a mining town on Tasmanian's West coast, is a 4.5 hour drive to Hobart and a 2 hour drive to Burnie. Whilst mining dominates its industry, education levels and employment opportunities remain low (Skills Tasmania, 2008a, p3). The Huon region again, whilst in fact not far from Hobart, is considered isolated, and has low levels of educational attainment and employment skills (Skill Tasmania, 2008b, p. 5).

Students in the pilot were recruited either directly by the participating LINC, or enrolled independently in UPP and then referred back to their local LINC. UPP's role in the program was to provide online content and academic support for students, to train the mentors and to provide liaison staff (one per LINC). LINC Tasmania's role was to recruit, match and provide on-ground support to students and mentors and to provide space for the mentors and students to meet. The staff/mentor training was held over two-days and was augmented by a week of online activities to allow mentors to become more familiar with UTAS' online learning system. Mentors were trained to facilitate independent learning and a clear distinction was made between the role of the mentor and the role of UPP teaching staff. In total 6 volunteer mentors and 12 students participated in the pilot.

Pilot evaluation

Students, mentors and UPP and LINC Tasmania staff all participated in the evaluation of the pilot. Given the small number of participants, and the desire to understand the impact of the pilot on individuals from their own personal perspective and understanding, a mainly qualitative approach was adopted (Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2006). Data was collected through a combination of one semi-structured focus group meeting (1.5 hours in duration and involving two UTAS staff, four LINC staff and three volunteer mentors) and eight semi-structured 1:1 interviews (approximately 30-60 minutes each, with one LINC staff, one volunteer mentor and six students - three who completed and three who did not complete). The focus group and 1:1 interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed, from which key themes and coding categories were identified and analysed. Quantitative data about retention and academic outcome of all participating students was also collected.

Findings

Though numbers are too small for statistical analysis, the fact that five of the twelve starters succeeded, as shown in Table 1 and 2, is at the very least encouraging. LINC staff reported that the newness of the program affected their ability to properly advise some students about the academic level and commitment required to complete it. The short implementation timeframe also limited recruitment activities. LINC staff anticipate being better able to recruit and advise students about the course in the future.

Whilst several students received fail results, these were students who stopped participating without officially withdrawing by census rather than students who failed in the traditional sense.

Table 1: Enrolment and completion

LINC Location	No. of Students Started	No. of Students Completed
Bridgewater	4	2
Huon	2	1
Queenstown	6	2
TOTAL	12	5

Table 2: Student results

LINC/Student	Unit 1	Result	Unit 2	Result	Unit 3*	Result
Queenstown						
Student 1	UPP010	NN	UPP055	NN		
Student 2	UPP010	NN	UPP055	NN		
Student 3	UPP010	UP	UPP055	UP		
Student 4	UPP010	UP	UPP055	UP		
Student 5	UPP010	NN	UPP055	NN		
Student 6	UPP010	NN	UPP055	Withdrawn		
Huon						
Student 1	UPP010	UP	UPP055	UP	UPP025	HD
Student 2	UPP010	NN				
Bridgewater						
Student 1	UPP010	UP	UPP055	UP		
Student 2	UPP010	Withdrawn	UPP055	Withdrawn		
Student 3	UPP010	Withdrawn	UPP055	Withdrawn		
Student 4	UPP010	UP	UPP055	UP		

Key:

Units

UPP010 Study Skills

UPP055 Using Technology

Grades

NN Fail

UP Ungraded Pass

HD High Distinction

*Student 1 from Huon enrolled in a unit which was not supported by the Pilot (UPP025 Introduction to Academic Writing) but as the mentor felt very comfortable with the content, she agreed to help with this unit also.

Themes from qualitative data

The following key themes emerged from the focus group and 1:1 interviews in relation to the overall effectiveness of the program. Names have been changed to protect students' identities.

Mentors made a significant difference to the students' perception of their ability to succeed

Whilst it is not possible from this small pilot to determine whether the provision of a mentor actually made the difference between a student's ability to pass or fail, it has undoubtedly influenced the student's perception of their ability to pass and to continue on. As Mary expressed in her interview:

And Martin [the mentor] was fantastic. I don't think I would've completed semester one without Martin cause he was just great. I wouldn't have completed semester one without Martin's support. There's just no way.

In another student-mentor relationship the student quickly became independent, but the support of the mentor was still crucial, as reported by LINC manager Rose:

She found your support crucial. She said it was really good to have your support even though she didn't need you all the time.... But she said when she did, she really needed you.

For this student, the mentor program helped create a way she could study and manage an underlying mental health condition:

I am a bit agoraphobic and I have panic attacks in crowds and strange places.....because it was at the library with people I knew there I felt comfortable.

The mentors also recognised the crucial nature of the support they were able to provide. Pam felt that without her support her student would have been alone with, 'no one to turn to' for help. She felt this would have impacted negatively on the student's chance of success. This is echoed by another mentor who felt that the mentors played a pivotal role in negotiating the initial online experience and providing encouragement to continue:

I don't think they could've done it without a mentor. Some at the start thought that distance learning was not for them. They were discouraged by the process. But without the mentoring program they would have struggled.

Mentors provided significant support that could not be provided through the normal online environment

In line with Bollinger and Martinade's (2004) key success factors in online learning, mentors were able to provide students with effective and timely support to help bridge the gap between online and on-campus study. Whilst a clear distinction was made between the role of the mentor (facilitating independence) and UPP teaching staff (teaching the content), mentors still played an important role in areas such as the interpretation of study material, practicing of skills, giving feedback, problem solving and helping students negotiate with UPP lecturers and tutors.

Mentor Pam explained that part of her role was, 'talking about the extra bits about studying at university'. In addition, she helped her student negotiate directly with UPP teaching staff when her student encountered a problem:

I think she was very reluctant [to contact UPP] and I said it's quite OK for you to ring or e-mail. It's quite OK.

Another mentor helped her student through the task of interpreting assignment instructions, 'she ran into [some trouble with] the last assignment, she needed a bit of hand-holding.' She also provided feedback as the student developed her skills, '..... we basically worked on those skills. And she improved out of all recognition, really she just needed a helping hand.'

The comments by the mentors are echoed in the voices of the students who found the ability of mentors to help them interpret meaning invaluable, as indicated below:

The readings - sometimes I didn't make much sense of the audios because sometimes they can be a bit scattered and that just made it hard for me to focus and concentrate and make sense of what she was trying to tell us. But it just meant that I'd had to go back and maybe listen to sections over again - read sections of text

again to try to get sense out of it. And when all else failed, Martin cleared everything up for us. It just made it so much easier having him here.

Similarly, Mavis, who said that whilst at first she only felt comfortable asking questions of her mentor, said by the end of the semester she was happy to go directly to the university staff.

The program offered opportunity where it was not obvious before

As indicated, the promise of online learning is that it can help overcome barriers created by time and distance (Power and Gould-Merven, 2011). Grace was motivated to participate in UPP because of travel issues and also because she was dealing with the effects of a workplace injury. For students from Queenstown, making the drive to Burnie or Hobart to study on-campus was not a realistic option. Mavis, too indicated, travel was an issue saying, "...it's a pain in the butt getting to Sandy Bay [location of UTAS's Hobart campus]". But even more than just distance or convenience, the program alerted students and communities to an opportunity which they had not previously known had existed. As LINC manager Anne explains:

I think it's great. For a community like this that gets so few people with degrees. I mean a lot of people come into town, you know, with university degrees. But so few people that are born and bred locals actually go on and achieve them. So I think it's a really exciting program that we've had quite a bit of interest.

This notion of making the possibility of higher education more visible is echoed by Rose:

Overall we're very pleased to offer the opportunity in a community where tertiary education isn't even thought about.

For another student, who identified herself as suffering from agoraphobia, the fact that the program was available in her local community prompted her to do something she had thought of previously, but never actually done:

I've looked on and off over the years thinking that I'd like to. But never really gone ahead with it. But then I was just walking into the library one day and saw it there.... I finally thought, "Yes, I am going to do this." If I would have had to go down to the university for an information session, I probably definitely wouldn't have done it.

For this student, being able to interact with local LINC staff with whom she already had an existing relationship, was pivotal.

Whilst this kind of phenomena is not surprising, the 'localisation' of provision had another unintended spin-off, as explained by LINC manager Rose:

One of the unintended consequences was that we didn't realize that our staff would see it as an opportunity. So staff who - who might have done the library technicians course or the paraprofessionals had been to TAFE, but some people who hadn't done any further education. Some of them suddenly thought here it is in my workplace, so that was a really good consequence.

It was also felt that the program offered students the opportunity to have a go without risking too much. As LINC manager Anne relates:

I think it's been a great opportunity. I mean, OK, they could give a little bit for go and if they didn't like it, they could back out. And I think for a community like this where a lot of people are really - not very confident That was good. They could have some sort of, face-saving exit strategy if it wasn't quite working for them.

Non-success was due to factors largely outside the control of the mentors

Six of the seven students who withdrew did so for personal reasons. Two of the three non-completing students interviewed indicated that they withdrew because they had not been able to manage the time commitment required. Sandy, a casual disability worker, indicated that she just didn't realise how hard it would be to manage the commitment of UPP as well as the mercurial demands of her job and that she found it very difficult to commit to set times. Even so, she found the experience motivating, and has now enrolled in a shorter, more manageable course to improve her IT skills as the first step to undertaking further study in the future.

Another student also commented on the time involved, saying she hadn't realised the time commitment. Once she had started and realised , she had to withdraw. She is, however, intending to come back and have another go.

One student, Grace, could have benefited from learning more about the program before she started:

I wasn't too sure when I actually took it on at the LINC. I wasn't too sure what it was really about.... I just thought I'd give it a go and see if I can. It was very daunting..... I'd never seen anything like it before..... LINC was helpful. But I didn't realise how far I could go with the help.

This student struggled finding her way with the mentor and the support provided and as a result, withdrew. However, despite her less than ideal first go, she intends to try again now that she has a better understanding of the course.

Conclusion

The overall feedback from all parties (UTAS, LINC Tasmania, volunteer mentors and students) involved in this pilot was positive and there is considerable enthusiasm for it to expand and continue in 2014. Neither community collaborations nor working with volunteers are issue or resource-free endeavours, and indeed there were several areas identified in the pilot where smoother organisational and communication practices could be established, however, in general this pilot has shown that volunteer mentors can be effectively trained to help students through their first encounter with higher education. The pilot has also demonstrated that mentors are greatly appreciated by the students and that from the students' perspective they can help overcome some of the new barriers learning online presents. It has also shown that offering this program in remote and disadvantaged regions can help make higher education more visible and accessible to those communities.

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