

Self-Help Study Group Program on International Students First Year Experience

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Abstract

The first year of university life represents a drastic change in the way students think and learn, as compared with their high school life. This phenomenon is particularly noticeable in those students coming alone from overseas to study in Australia. They have to adapt quickly to a new environment - in terms of culture, social relations as well as intellectual diversification.

All students in the Faculty of Business at the Victoria University of Technology must successfully complete a Business core Computing unit. To enhance the learning and communication skills for this unit, the Department of Information Systems at Victoria University of Technology has been running a Self-Help Study Group (SHSG) program for international students at its Footscray campus for the last five semesters. With the input of the staff, these students have an outlet to seek care and assistance from their peers or the staff when they come across any learning and/or personal problems. A less obvious benefit of the SHSG is to establish a communication peer group to curb feelings of loneliness.

This paper will highlight the experiences of the authors on SHSG program with first year international students and comment on the value of the program for both students and staff.

Introduction

The term 'International students' was introduced in the Minister's policy statement of September 1992, International Education in Australia. (Ward and Grey, 1993)

... through the 1990s, which outlined Australia's move to a more internationally oriented education system. The term 'international students' refers to students who have a visa or temporary entry permit for the purpose of undertaking a course of study in Australia...

International students need the social support and friendship networks to guard against culture shock (Furnham, 1997). Typical problems that international students would normally face include (i) lack of competence in spoken and written English, especially among those students whose home language is not English; (ii) homesickness and culture shock; (iii) no background in the politics and history of the new country; (iv) difficulties fitting into student life in the country (Ballard and Clanchy, 1997). In a survey of international students of the Faculty of Business (Tsang, Bull and Shou, 1997), four main areas were identified as perceived obstacles to study progress. Language is perceived to be the biggest problem (57%). Handling assignments (51%) follows closely behind. Examinations (44%) and Students' concern about the lack of guidance in course selection (40%) constitute the other major main concerns.

There are many universities in the world, which compete in the international market and offer places to overseas students. Lewis and Shea (1994) found that the high rates of Malaysian students returning with an Australian degree supports the contention that Australian university degrees are not overpriced. There may even be scope to increase tuition fees without affecting demand as long as Australia does not become uncompetitive with other countries.

Professor Jocelyn Chey, visiting Professor to the Victoria University of Technology and former Consul General to Australia identified the need for an infrastructure to provide care, attention and special services for international students.

The best way to attract international students to Australia universities ...(is) to build an infrastructure designed to provide the care, attention and service required by students new to Australia's tertiary education. (Nexus 1996)

This provided the impetus for the funding of a proposal for the mentoring of first year students at the Victoria University of Technology, Victoria. The launch of the program, termed the Self-Help Study Group occurred in October 1996. Its specific target was International students within the Faculty of Business at the Footscray campus of the University.

The Self-Help Study Group (SHSG) program

The SHSG program was funded by the Faculty of Business. The target group is the International students enrolled in the first year Business core computing unit. The major aims are to develop a friendship network amongst current students for their own benefit, to develop self help units promoting mutual academic, social and cultural support and to develop a cohort of students as mentors for future student intakes. The initial launch of the program was held in October 1996 at a lunch forum for international students enrolled in the Business core Computing unit.

Clulow (1995) suggested that the range of developmental functions to which a peer may contribute creates a unique interaction that can support any individual's development. In terms of persistence with study, particularly in first year, enhancing student's and faculty's awareness of the possible benefits of mentoring relationships could lead to greater retention rates. While Bowden (1990), Quintrell and Westwood (1994) suggested using a host and overseas student to form peer pairing, the authors' contention is that cultural shock is considerably reduced when two overseas students act as mutual confidantes. They are far better off in terms of socio-cultural adjustment. So, in the SHSG program, the peer-to-peer program was based on the belief that students originating from the same country or nearby countries have more cultural similarities than would be the case with an international / Australian student peer relationship; and should therefore achieve optimum benefit.

There are thirteen teaching weeks per semester. Each semester, the number of students enrolled in the Business core Computing unit varies from two to six hundred. Of these, about thirty to sixty are international students. Most of them are first year students. Not only are they new to the University but most of them may have only just arrived in Australia. It is typical that some, in fact, arrive after the commencement of the semester. Enrolment for the subject is generally not finalised until week 4. In order to create a more friendly and harmonious atmosphere, the formation of the SHSG was centred around a shared lunch with the students around week 5 or 6. In the first meeting, students were organised to form groups, mostly according to their own choice. It is interesting to note that students tend to group according to their country of origin.

From then onwards, regular weekly meetings each lasting from one to one-and-a-half hours were held. In between these meetings, students met their group mates in their own time. During the weekly meetings, informal discussions were held with the students on the lecture topics covered in the course. Study difficulties were aired together with the sharing of the students' experiences in their home country. Students were encouraged to resolve their own problems. Prepared lecture topic questions was used as a catalyst and a lead-up to the weekly discussions. Groups were encouraged to discuss these questions amongst themselves prior to the meetings. Group members were also encouraged to communicate to each other through the use of E-mail.

Group size varied between two to four. The major benefits for small groups as against a large amorphous group includes the encouragement of discussion as a means of clarifying and extending students' understanding of the course material. A second benefit arising from small groups is the development in students of an acceptance of individual responsibility for mastering both the subject content matter and the intellectual approaches appropriate to the discipline.

Experiences

Concerning the Students

A number of difficulties were encountered by students throughout the program with respect to participation, attendance, communication and language.

Participation

Students found difficulty with finding a mutually convenient time when all participants could meet. Many students expressed a desire to join the program, but excluded themselves because meeting times clashed with their lecture or workshop times or even with their part-time jobs.

Attendance

Attendance rates varied from week to week in accordance to external demands placed on the students. Poor attendance is evidenced on weeks when a test is carried out or an assignment is due. It must be said that when an assignment is due there is a tendency for most students to be wholly focused towards getting help for completing their assignments. This caused the breakdown of the cohesion within groups, and was a source of frustration to the authors.

Communication

Although E-mail represented an ideal opportunity for communication, students found access to be an insurmountable hurdle, as most of them do not have access from their residential homes. Whilst students could make use of the University's facilities, they found that computer rooms were often full of other students and hence an impediment to access.

Language

The major difficulty for international students is their relatively poor understanding of the subject where English is their second language (Tsang, Bull and Shou). They need to ascertain the meanings of most of the words in the lecture notes from the dictionaries - English is their gross hindrance to learning. This impeded their learning experience and was a barrier to their success.

Concerning the Authors

The Authors also experienced several difficulties, but these were tempered by the triumphs.

Venue

Booking of a suitable venue, whilst not difficult, was certainly a challenge. Meeting rooms or conference rooms provide a friendly and open ambience for the casual chat and discussion. Classrooms or laboratories presents a formal atmosphere and stifle discussion. Unfortunately, an ideal congenial venue was not always available.

Administration

Other difficulties matched those of Craig and Fisher (1995).

There were many difficulties in contacting students - wrong numbers, students not there, messages not getting through etc. Identifying students from the student administration system is extremely difficult and time consuming

Time Allocation

Some students had problems in practical computer skills. This resulted in requests for short-term help for doing assignments as required. It must be noted that one of the objectives for the program is to try to improve the life-long study skills of students rather than merely helping them finish certain assignments. This tended to erode the time allowed for discussion.

Authors' Successes

The following indicate some of the successes of the authors over the past five semesters.

Communication Skills

The initial reluctance of students to join in group discussions may in part be due to their prior learning experience in their home country, their passive learning mode and their reading styles. These can vary substantially from that espoused within the Australian university environment. Some students were reluctant to speak up, as they could not fully express themselves in English, their second language. The meetings provided them with more chances to speak and present their ideas. In fact, the majority of students became more confident in expressing themselves as the program progressed.

Language

Language was a recognised difficulty. According to the Bloom's Taxonomy of learning objectives (1997), some International students were only up to the knowledge level, i.e. recall and list facts and had not reached the analysis level, let alone the evaluation level. It is understandable that at times International students tried to memorise the subject content instead of comprehending it. The meetings provided a venue where students could identify parts of the lectures they had difficulty interpreting and could seek clarification of the meaning of the text. The fact that they were seeking clarification is indicative of the progress they made from Bloom's knowledge level to at least the analysis if not the evaluation level.

Care and Nurture

The program also provided a good training ground for nurturing. Some groups became very cohesive; they photocopied the lecture notes to share amongst themselves and participated actively in discussions.

Self-Confidence

Although help with practical computer skills eroded the time available for discussions, there was evidence that students were more relaxed and settled in their work after the provision of this help.

Evaluation of the program

There is a dichotomy between starting the program mid semester and thus reducing the available time to resolve student issue and starting at an earlier date, before the completion of enrolment, and at a time when students have little appreciation of the imminence of the final examination. The SHSG program chose the former approach and has been running for 5 semesters.

The program can be evaluated both quantitatively upon academic outcome as well as qualitatively in so far as it was a vehicle for providing friendship and a caring environment and not merely study support.

An informal survey was conducted at the end of each semester. The feedback of the students was good. In general they thought that the program was helpful to them in terms of study of the subject and also in developing friendships.

Typical of the students' comments are:

It can help me to more clearly understand every topic, and it have given me a revision that something I didn't mention. Give me an opinion what the lecture telling us.

Very helpful and encourages revision making it easier when it comes to the exam.

I think is good for student who don't understand about the computer.

Very useful guide to students to answer with exam questions plus how to go about studying for exam.

For a beginner in computer I need all the help I can get. I find that the special tutorial useful.

An analysis of the examination results is reported in Bull and Tsang (1997)

Participating (SHSG program) students' results were analysed and compared with the cohort of all students enrolled in the subject. The results confirm that international students are disadvantaged and at risk compared to the general population of students, but that participation in a

SHSG program provides a significant enhancement to their likelihood to succeed.

Some specific results (Bull and Tsang, 1997) based on pass rates were:

<i>Non-International:</i>	<i>93.0%</i>
<i>International students participating in SHSG</i>	<i>92.3%</i>
<i>International students not participating in SHSG</i>	<i>20.0%</i>

That the aim to develop a cohort of students as mentors for future student intake was not viable became evident very early in the program. Whilst students were happy to act as guides to new students in the first few weeks of semester, it is understandable that their own study program precludes them from assisting others on a prolonged basis without mutual benefit to themselves.

Conclusion

The Self-Help Study Group program has proved to be a valuable support to the international students, especially those in their first year of study. It was clear that the program was not able to reach the whole of the target group because of the inflexibility of timetables. The program as implemented reached the maximum number of students. The implementation of additional group meeting times to target the remaining students would have been an improvement. To develop it to its full potential, which includes aspects of counselling and enhancement of friendship, would have required an increase in staff time and resources.

Given its budgetary limitation, the success of the SHSG program can be measured qualitatively in terms of the willingness of participants to join in discussion and expressly share their views; the formation of friendship through small group discussions and the development of self confidence in the students. Measured analytically, its success may be judged from its ability to lift the pass rate of International students from below 75% to better than 90% thus matching the pass rate of that of non-international students.

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