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“The university didn’t actually tell us this is what you have to do”: Social inclusion through embedding of academic skills in first year professional courses

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Abstract

The widening participation agenda means that students will be entering degree courses with increasingly diverse needs, particularly with respect to the academic skills necessary for successful tertiary study in Australia. This paper presents findings from a mixed methods project investigating first year social work students’ perceived role in academic skills and their development. Students expressed the perception that academic skill requirements and how they would be assessed should be made explicit, and identified a stigma associated with accessing study support services. The paper concludes that an intentional design strategy, such as embedding academic skills into the curriculum, helps bridge the different expectations between academics and students in the teaching and learning of academic skills, and hence constitutes a socially inclusive strategy to teaching professional courses such as social work, within higher education. Recommendations to enhance the success and sustainability of such an initiative in the current higher education environment are offered.

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Introduction

Academic or study skills are traditionally seen as those skills required to successfully participate in, and complete, an educational course. There is growing recognition that tertiary students need support in acquiring the skills necessary for higher education (Horstmannshof & Brownie, 2013), particularly as students are entering degree courses with increasingly diverse levels of academic preparedness as a result of the widening participation agenda (see Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008). It has been noted that traditional initiatives to assist students with academic skill development are likely to be ineffective on their own, as they are located in a dominant or mainstream pedagogy in relation to thinking, creating and conveying knowledge, which may isolate and exclude some students (Hockings, Cooke & Bowl, 2009). In this contemporary environment, a socially inclusive approach must necessarily seek to understand the diversity of students’ experiences and consider ways to develop approaches to learning which are inclusive of all students irrespective of their level of academic preparedness and socio-cultural background. In this sense, social inclusion means having higher education processes and structures which take into account and respond to diverse learning and support needs, so that all students have a reasonable chance of success. This may be seen as an equity issue, since “access without a reasonable chance of success is an empty phrase” (International Association of Universities, 2008, p. 1). There is also a practical need to ensure social inclusiveness, as it will contribute to preventing attrition which is costly to both students and universities.

The initiation of a project funded by a [University] Teaching and Learning Grant

at an Australian university provided an opportunity to explore social work students’ perceptions of their role or agency in learning academic skills in first year tertiary study. The aim of the project was to explore expectations of first year students and social work academics in relation to the teaching and learning of academic skills, and to use this to develop a framework for academic skills progression. As part of the framework’s development, the project team undertook research with first year social work students. This paper will discuss the current literature on the topic, the methodology used, project findings and implications for delivery of inclusive approaches to academic skills development for students in their first year of tertiary education.

There is a small body of existing research on social work students’ perceptions of academic skills, but most studies focus on experienced undergraduate or postgraduate students (for example, Alter & Adkins, 2001; Gordon, Miller, Dumbleton, Kelly & Aldgate, 2011; Rai, 2004). However, one study specifically focused on academic skills for first year social work students (Collins & Van Breda, 2010). The authors had concluded that there were academic skill competencies which must be acquired in the first year for social work students to successfully complete their learning. Since then, research has shown that outsourcing this development to other programs (for instance, generic study skills workshops) or other departments in the university (such as academic support units or the library), is ineffective due to the contextual and discipline-specific nature of academic skills (Gunn, Hearne & Sibthorpe, 2011). The need to develop discipline-specific skills in an embedded way has been recognised in other professional undergraduate courses in nursing (Cassar, 2010) and psychology (Cranney, Morris,

Spehar & Scoufis, 2008). Recognition has led to collaborations between academic staff, language and learning advisers, library staff and careers units to integrate skills throughout curricula. Of interest therefore, is how first year social work students experience academic skill demands in Australia, and whether a similar approach is warranted.

Method

This study used a mixed methods approach to address the research question, collecting data through surveys and individual interviews. Data collected through surveys were analysed using descriptive and inductive statistics. These surveys also included some open answer questions, which were analysed thematically. Data from the interviews were analysed using Strauss and Corbin's (1990) process of inductive thematic coding. Each transcript was independently coded by two members of the project team, initially through open coding. Frequent comparison was then used to compare data within and across the transcripts, with concepts being grouped together into larger categories or themes. After completion of coding, each researcher produced a set of themes and their constituent codes for comparison. The two sets of themes were examined for overlap or missing categories, with the resulting analysis being peer reviewed by a third team member.

Sample

Students enrolled in their first year of a social work degree who had not previously undertaken study at a university, were invited to participate in the study through electronic communication which included a link to complete the survey online. A total of 50 students participated in the survey,

which represents a response rate of 33% of the total enrolments within the two units approached. Upon completion of the online survey, participants were then invited to participate in semi-structured interviews, and four students volunteered. Not all respondents answered all questions, and when less than the total sample responded, the valid percentage and response numbers are reported. Participation occurred within the first six months of study. The majority of respondents were female (86%), and the average age was 30.54 (SD 10.14, Range 18-50). Most students were Australian born (84%), local citizens (82%) and had English as their primary language (spoken 96%, written 96%, home use 94%). When the postcodes of students were analysed using the POA (Postal Areas) Index of Education and Occupation 2006 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006), 17.9% were found to come from low socio-economic areas.

Respondents had entered university through a range of pathways, with most entering via mature aged entry (45.5% valid responses), TAFE (34.1% valid responses), and secondary education (18.2% valid responses). Many had applied to university under the Special Entry Access Scheme (SEAS) (31.8%), with the most common categories identified as mature age, financial disadvantage and rural/remote. Many respondents held diplomas as their highest and most recent qualification, with high school completion as the next most frequently reported qualification. A significant percentage of students reported being first in family to attend university (36.4%), with some also stating that family members had attended university overseas (20.5%). There were also a substantial number of students who identified themselves as having a disability (18.2%), of whom half had registered with

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the university’s Disability Services Unit for individualised learning support.

Students were asked whether they had previously completed any academic skills training. While the majority had not, nearly a quarter (23.1 %) had been provided with specific support in the past. The length of training received ranged from a single session to years, and skills learnt included academic writing, time management and referencing. Those reporting years of training indicated they considered all of their secondary education as providing them with training in academic skills.

Findings

Assumptions and expectations

First year social work students reported considerable uncertainty about what was expected from them with regard to academic skills. Interview participants stated they felt like they had to “learn” these inherent assumptions during their initial weeks at university, while simultaneously learning course material and navigation of the institution as a whole. Students expressed an assumption that what was required of them would be spelt out and were surprised when this did not occur:

The university didn’t actually tell us this is what you have to do as opposed to school ... I think you should be well prepared in advance. (Student Interview 3)

Students also felt that facilitated preparation would support their academic skills development, and were of the view that they should have access to required information much earlier to avoid time pressure:

...unit guides, are always up a week before the trimester starts, so maybe if they did it a little bit earlier and then if you want any clarification because you can prepare yourself a lot better if it’s well in advance rather than in the very last minute. (Student Interview 3)

Clear and explicit statements of expectations were appreciated, as students then felt comfortable that they were “on the right track.” Their general perception was that they had to work far more independently, and that there were specific areas which the university saw as a priority. For a number of students, the challenge was figuring out what the priority was, as expressed in the following quote:

It would be useful to see things as a list ... some sort of priority order ... like okay these are the things you need to learn. (Student Interview 2)

The students themselves recognised that they entered higher education with some assumptions and expectations, which had been met to differing degrees. A common assumption was that they would be receiving more individual support and attention than they did, including assistance with being engaged and motivated:

It would be nice say to have someone actually sitting there with me maybe and trying to encourage me to actually do the writing or to actually just help me. (Student Interview 4)

This was in direct contrast with the independent learning expectations of students, as shown when students were asked who was responsible for the development of their academic skills. In most cases, students discussed their own individual agency and success:

...some of the tutors and some of the lecturers... they're not ones to sort of spoon feed us which was really good but they dropped me some hints and trails, rather than just throwing the answers in front of you and doing the work for you. (Student Interview 1)

Barriers to success

Successfully developing academic skills in first year was seen to be dependent on a range of factors, which were both internal and external to the student. All participants acknowledged that pressures and distractions from life outside of university can impinge on studies and make academic skill development more difficult.

I had ongoing problems as well throughout ... it was very, very difficult to be able to just block out everything. (Student Interview 3)

A lack of resources was also commonly cited as a barrier to academic progression. Many of the students work part time in addition to studying, but despite this often feel under financial constraint:

There's a few fees you've got to work for ... you're expected to pay for your own books and get all your equipment all set up. (Student Interview 1)

While students were aware of existing study skills support offered through the university, several students expressed uncertainty on how to access their services, or lacked awareness of the range of support available and who to ask for what:

I suppose it would be other teachers. I'm not sure... But I wasn't sure who to speak to with the teachers and students in regards to that. (Student Interview 4)

Student views regarding study support services were generally positive, but there

was also a perception that using these services entailed "extra hassle" which they didn't feel they needed on top of all the other adjustments they were making for university:

They [other students] just found it too tiring to look for (the guide to assignment writing) ... it was just too much to worry about, too much running around. (Student Interview 1)

These services were seen to be separate from their courses or faculty, and students were reluctant to access them. Several also indicated they felt stigmatised by having to seek out these "special services":

Sometimes you just don't feel comfortable going to other places ... I might feel embarrassed about doing it, going in there and getting help. (Student Interview 4)

Facilitators of success

Two main factors that facilitated successful academic skill progression were identified: structured, explicit expectations, and support. The first of these factors echoed the previously reported findings about assumptions and expectations, in that students felt more able to develop academic skills when they had a clear sense of what was required. Practice exams and exemplar assignments were thought to be particularly helpful.

I guess students need to be ... given some clear outline of the things they really need to develop. (Student Interview 2)

Understanding exactly what I have to put into the essay ... (and what a good essay looks like) that would be a great help. (Student Interview 4)

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Students consistently stated that formative assessment, which continued throughout the unit and provided ongoing feedback was helpful in developing skills. Alternatively, summative assessments at the end of units left them no time to improve using feedback:

I think every unit should at least have multiple choice quizzes through the trimester to be able to see where you’re at. (Student Interview 3)

When considering their support needs, students were able to identify a range of sources for information and guidance around academic skill development. Some were formal (such as lecturers, tutors, mentors and university services), and these were generally perceived to be helpful:

I feel like there’s a trail there ... a trail of breadcrumbs. (Student Interview 2).

Resources were also provided but some students were not assisted to use them, rendering them practically unhelpful:

There’s weekly planners and ... I’ve tried using one but I was a bit unsure about how to use them properly. (Student Interview 4)

Survey responses to the question about who students would turn to for help indicated that they were most likely to approach academic skill advisors (Mean = 3.67, SD = 0.90) or lecturers (Mean 3.61, SD = 1.20), and less likely to approach unspecified others (Mean = 1.75, SD = 1.50) or their families (Mean = 2.50, SD = 1.28). Again SEAS applicants displayed a different pattern of engagement, as they were found to be less likely to approach study skills advisors for assistance ($\chi^2 = 7.81$, $df = 32$, $p = 0.05$, Cramer’s $V = 0.48$) than other

students, but more likely to approach family.

An individualised approach to support was perceived by the students to be most effective, particularly those forms of support that enabled them to receive personalised and interactive support. Positive relationships with those from whom they were receiving support were beneficial, and enhanced development of academic skills:

I know that they’re always there beside me, I’m not sort of left on my own to fend for myself, it makes sense of the situation. (Student Interview 3)

When asked in the survey to rate various means of support, both experience (Mean = 4.57, SD = 0.71) and feedback (Mean = 4.24, SD = 1.00) were identified as the strategies that students would most likely use to develop academic skills. Once again SEAS applicants were found to respond differently, being significantly less likely to believe they would learn academic skills from feedback than other students ($\chi^2 = 12.33$, $df = 4$, $p = 0.02$, Cramer’s $V = 0.61$).

The format of support offered was also discussed by students, with all agreeing that academic skills support should begin at the very start of the course. Orientation week was thought to be a good opportunity for this, but participants suggested that voluntary attendance might mitigate the potential benefits of this approach. There was also some recognition that basic skills had to be mastered before others could develop. Some students felt the assumptions and expectations discussed previously led teachers to simply assume that all students had a similar baseline level of academic skills upon commencement. Those who were yet to reach this level were in danger of being left

behind, but graded support enabled everyone to develop:

There's those who don't have that basic knowledge (essay writing) and so if you're stuffed there all this stuff [that]'s not going to help you really too much, because you don't have anything to sort of build-up on in the first place. (Student Interview 1)

Finally, the students gave several descriptions of the quality of support experiences they had encountered. Many students' recollections had an affective aspect to them, and this was at times more important than the content or skill being "taught" through that support:

I guess it's difficult to sort of try and remember the exact content on the day, I just know that I left with that impression ... I'm okay. (Student Interview 2)

Skills

The skills most often identified by students were academic writing (including essays / assignments), time management / organisation, research skills, note taking and referencing. There were also a number of skills (n=18) which were only identified by one student, showing some degree of diversity within the sample. Students were also asked to rate the skills they identified according to both their perceived importance and their perceived existing competence, using a Likert scale. Critical analysis (Mean = 5.00, SD=0.00), determination (Mean=5.00, SD=0.00), stress management (Mean=5.00, SD=0.00), academic writing (including essays/assignments) (Mean=4.79, SD=0.50) and referencing (Mean=4.71, SD=0.46) were considered to be the most important skills for social work students. In

the interviews, some of these skills were simply identified without further comment.

All students alluded to the need to develop not only academic skills but also self-management. This included skills such as developing work/life balance, self-control, confidence, and become discerning in their choices around study. Some students also described feelings of anxiety and perfectionism in relation to their performance of academic skills. They had all developed individual strategies to manage these mental stressors and prevent them from having a detrimental impact on their ability to study successfully, as shown by the students below:

I guess it was about how much pressure I want to place on myself when I'm doing my first subject so it was a case of okay, don't go in there with half an effort but don't try to kill yourself. (Student Interview 2)

Mean scores for competence with academic skills were much lower. Those for which students were most confident in their existing skills included determination (Mean=4.67, SD=0.71), stress management (Mean=4.00, SD=0.00), and verbal and non-verbal communication (Mean= 3.43, SD=0.79). However, students expressed little confidence in their existing ability to take notes and attend to lectures (Mean=1.86, SD=0.90), library skills (Mean=2.25, SD=0.96), exam preparation (Mean=2.67, SD=0.58), IT skills (Mean=2.60, SD=0.89), academic writing (Mean =2.82, SD=0.77) and research skills (Mean=2.93, SD=0.93). Interview participants elaborated on these skills, confirming that grammar, exam preparation and noting and retaining information were areas they knew needed further development.

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When asked to rate their current overall competence in academic skills, the students were fairly evenly split between beginner (60.6%) or skilled (39.4%). None felt they were either experts or had no skills at all.

Discussion

From this analysis of data collected from students in first year, a clear theme that emerges is that they were uncertain about what was expected of them, and academics’ expectations and priorities around students’ academic skills were often not made explicit. With the large amount of information given to first year students as they attempt to settle into a new place, new systems and new expectations, the lack of explicit instruction about to what was expected, and how to meet those expectations with regards to academic skill, caused students difficulty. Students also did not know how to prioritise and use the information they received. Students identified that practice exams and exemplar assignments were helpful, as many students struggled to identify and prioritise what to focus on and learn in their first year.

With respect to resources outside the discipline of social work, students noted difficulty in identifying who to ask for various types of assistance. In keeping with findings from the literature (for example, Hafford-Letchfield, 2007), they also identified stigma associated with accessing academic support services and difficulty in finding time to access them. Nevertheless, external support services were identified as more likely to be approached than lecturers. There was an interpersonal/interactive quality to support which was perceived as useful. Students further identified that static resources such as weekly planners were

not helpful unless they were supported in how to use them.

Despite being relatively new to academia, these first year students were able to identify a range of skills they felt were important, with academic writing being the most frequently cited. They acknowledged they arrived with some skills but lacked confidence in core skills such as preparing for and attending lectures, note taking, academic writing and use of the library and referencing. Interestingly, many responses related to personal qualities rather than those traditionally identified as academic skills. These included determination, developing work/life balance, self-control, confidence and becoming discerning in their choices around study. The fact that first year students’ perceptions that skills that are important to pass the social work course were significantly broader than the traditional conceptions of academic skills, and included personal qualities such as determination and self-control, is an interesting finding, which could be usefully explored further.

Also of interest is the comparison of responses given by first year SEAS pathway students with those from students who had accessed university through other pathways. Data showed that they were less likely than others to approach lecturers or study support services for assistance with academic skills. In addition they were less confident that they would develop their academic skills through feedback than students who had entered higher education through other pathways. Reasons for this are unclear, but could be due to cultural differences in help-seeking, or unfamiliarity with prevailing ways of thinking, creating and conveying knowledge (epistemology). These findings suggest that to be inclusive of this group and ensure their ongoing success and

engagement with higher education, academic skills required to pass the course need to be made explicit and taught alongside curriculum content to enable those not familiar with them to participate fully.

In addition, academic skills are now recognised as being dependent on cultural and social norms (Lea, 2004). As noted by Hockings, et al. (2009), the dominant pedagogy underpinning academic skills may be alienating for some students who now access university under the widening participation agenda, particularly if non-dominant ways of thinking, creating and conveying knowledge are not acknowledged and fostered. Thus, a framework has been developed by the research team (Authors' own) to not only support teaching teams to clarify the academic skills required within their school or discipline area (and the epistemology which underpins them), but to also consider ways to include students' ways of knowing. Once clarified, teaching teams may embed academic skills into their curriculum so that they can support all students, irrespective of their background.

Nevertheless, recent literature describes various processes trialled to achieve an embedded approach to academic skills into the curricula (Chanock, Horton, Reedman, & Stephenson, 2012; Jacobs, 2007; Magyar, McAvoy, & Forstner, 2011). These studies found that teaching staff required support from specialist academic skills advisers in order to successfully and sustainably make academic skills explicit within curricula. Success depended on close collaboration between these advisers and teaching staff over a sustained period, and mutual commitment to the goal of a socially inclusive and discipline based approach. It

also depended upon wider institutional support and mandate.

Conclusion

Findings from this study suggest that, in the widening participation environment, socially inclusive ways of supporting diverse social work students' development of academic skills are warranted given the difficulties students have identified in acquiring such skills and accessing traditional forms of support when needed. This is particularly relevant for students who have accessed university through SEAS pathways. Intentional design strategies such as embedding academic skills into the curriculum will help bridge the gap which may arise as a result of different expectations between academics and students in the teaching and learning of academic skills. A discipline specific system or framework is needed, which explicitly articulates the skills students require, guides the processes of embedding such skills into the curriculum, and at the same time values and acknowledges other ways of creating and conveying knowledge. In addition, wider institutional support and close collaboration between academic literacy specialists and teaching staff will ensure ongoing success and sustainability of such an initiative. Thus, embedding academic skills into the curriculum is one step of the many required to work towards equity and social inclusion for all students engaged professional training, both in the first year and beyond.

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