

Lifting the Learning Curve: Personal Academic Training in La Trobe University Arts Foundation Subjects

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Abstract

The Personal Academic Training Scheme was piloted in 2014, building on positive results of the First-Year Advising programs in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at La Trobe University. The innovative scheme was designed as a targeted, integrated academic skills and mentoring program embedded within the compulsory first year Bachelor of Arts foundation studies subjects. The program was born out of the need to support an increasingly diverse student body with varying academic literacies and confidence levels. Postgraduate academic mentors worked one-on-one with first-year students identified as at risk of academic failure and dropping out of the Bachelor of Arts to develop academic skills and enhance the first-year experience. The provision of a personalised service to those students most at risk brought improvements in student confidence levels and overall academic achievement and success.

Introduction

In response to an increasingly diversifying student body, falling ATARs in the Bachelor of Arts (BA) and growing numbers of students from low socio-economic backgrounds, the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at La Trobe University (LTU) has implemented a range of high-profile retention initiatives over the past five years to prepare students adequately for university and help them adjust to tertiary education.¹ In 2014, building on its history of successful academic and personal advising strategies, the faculty modified its First-Year Academic Advising support scheme, which had been funded by the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Programme (HEPPP), to make it suitable for integration into the first year foundation subjects 'The Art of Being Human' and 'Ideas that Shook the World'. These subjects were first run in 2014 and are obligatory for all BA students. The program that emerged from this modification process was first embedded within 'Ideas that Shook the World' in semester 2, 2014.

The new program was named the 'Personal Academic Training Scheme' (PAT Scheme). This title was chosen with reference to physical personal training programs to promote the idea that 'exercising' academic skills would result in academic 'fitness'. Different from previous retention projects, this scheme established sustainable dimensions of active and collaborative learning (Coates, 2006) that exceeded student-to-student peer relationships at an undergraduate level, instead creating sustained mentoring relationships between first-year and postgraduate students, who provided targeted academic intervention and pastoral support. The Personal Academic Trainers (PATs) were defined as skills trainers (rather than tutors) and were clearly associated with the foundation subjects. Results demonstrate the long-term potential of this particular program for sustaining student success within the BA. They demonstrate the

¹ Retention initiatives at La Trobe University are part of the Future Ready Strategic Plan, which is available at: <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/about/downloads/Future-Ready-Strategic-Plan-2013-2017.pdf>.

clear benefits of employing personal academic trainers to bolster targeted undergraduate students' academic skills, while providing mentoring opportunities for postgraduate students. This is of particular importance in the current climate of financial cuts to tertiary education, where academic staff no longer have the capacity to adequately train the increasing numbers of students that enter university with an insufficient skills base.

Context and History

With more students from diverse backgrounds entering tertiary education in Australia and across the globe than ever before (Coates & Mahat, 2014), it has become necessary to fundamentally redesign existing learning environments and adjust teaching and learning strategies to foster student engagement (McCormick, Kinzie & Gonyea, 2013; Kuh, 2003). In Australia, the 2008 Bradley Review of Higher Education, initiated by the Australian Government, called for long-term change. Departing from the traditional, merit-based approaches to learning that single out small elite clusters of student populations, this report recommended instead a shift towards more inclusive, skill-developing and student-centred strategies. University policy imperatives to widen participation has led to increased numbers of students from low socio-economic backgrounds and first-in-family students. The change in intake has led universities to fundamentally re-consider their methods of student engagement, academic and pastoral support services as well as the pedagogy of tertiary education (Coates & Mahat, 2014). Improving the quality of teaching and learning to accommodate varying student capabilities in order to raise engagement levels and student satisfaction has become a central focus of universities in an increasingly competitive higher education market (Coates & Mahat, 2014; Karimshah, 2013). In 2002 the American-based National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) found that a 'supported campus environment', in which students feel the available help is useful and easily accessible, is fundamental to successful learning (NSSE 2002). In response, the Australian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) has included the item 'supportive learning environment' in its own survey, which has now become one of the survey's prime indicators of student satisfaction (2012). Reason, Terenzini and Domingo (2007, p. 272) argue that there is a link between students' sense of support at an institution and their social and personal competence. These findings suggest the importance of both out-of-class and in-class support. In response to these findings and driven by the financial need to increase retention numbers (Massy, 2013; Sullivan, Mackie, Massy & Sinha, 2012) Australian universities with a diverse student body, including low SES, low ATAR, mature-aged, and international students, have put extensive frameworks for academic and personal support in place (Nelson, Clarke, Kift & Creagh, 2011).

At La Trobe University, the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences has been at the forefront of developing formalised and consistent academic advising relationships to improve student motivation, academic success, satisfaction and retention (Cuseo, n.d.; Ishler & Upcraft, 2005; Thomas & Hixenbaugh, 2006). Several of these schemes were later taken on by other faculties at LTU. Prompted by high attrition rates in the first year of the BA in 2010 (Harvey & Luckman, 2014), the faculty introduced a range of support services based on two principles derived from research. Firstly, at-risk students from a variety of backgrounds can benefit from targeted early interventions in response to the first signs of struggle (Habley & Schuh, 2007; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges & Hayek, 2007; Kuh 2011; Nelson, Quinn, Marrington & Clarke, 2012; Chanock, Horton,

Reedman & Stephenson, 2012). Secondly, ‘personal tutoring’ initiatives have proven particularly useful for student retention, satisfaction and success (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Thomas & Hixenbaugh, 2006). Kuh (2011) suggests that frequent contact with an academic advisor can promote ‘greater self-reported gains in personal and social development, practical competence ... and more frequent use of deep approaches to learning’ (p. 71). Accordingly, the faculty introduced Subject Support Tutors (SSTs) for large first-year subjects in the Humanities and Social Sciences who worked with students to improve academic skills individually and through workshops. In 2012, the faculty started an Academic Advising program, which was first hosted by academics, later by postgraduate students and early career researchers. Moreover, in 2013, the faculty also successfully introduced an electronic ‘Academic Early Warning Systems’ (AEWS) that picks up the first signs of disengagement from students, such as non-attendance and non-submission of assessments (Harvey & Luckman, 2014). Once students had been identified by the system, trained support staff began assisting the ‘flagged’ students (Macfadyen & Dawson, 2010). These ‘early intervention’ systems (Beck & Davidson, 2001) are particularly useful because they also pick up students whose academic performance is impacted by personal challenges rather than a lack of skills (Johnson & Beck, 1988; Elkins, Braxton & James, 2000). All of these programs were designed to identify at risk-students early and provide quick, easy and systematic access to face-to-face support from experienced postgraduate students and staff. As a result, retention numbers across the faculty and particularly in the BA went up significantly. In 2014, Subject Support Tutoring and Academic Advising were united within the comprehensive First-Year Advising Program. The joint approach of these programs enabled targeted interventions on a departmental level, ultimately extending beyond the BA to include subjects in the faculty’s specialised/niche degrees as well. This program was then modified to suit the newly established foundation studies and the PAT Scheme was piloted in semester 2, 2014.

Aims & Methodology

The PAT Scheme was designed to help a range of students with academic performance as part of LTU’s measures to ease the transition into tertiary education. Its design reflects the importance of the first-year experience, which is ‘critical not only for how much students learn but also for laying the foundation on which their subsequent academic success and persistence rest’ (Reason, Terenzini & Domingo, 2006). As such, the program was part of LTU’s concerted response to the well-known transition issue of under-preparedness for academic work (Trotter and Roberts, 2006; Thomas, 2003) and to Harvey & Luckman’s (2014) findings that the strongest factor for student attrition is poor first-year academic performance. LTU has a very diverse student intake and cannot simply expect students to immediately adapt to unfamiliar teaching and learning styles (Hagan & Macdonald, 2000).

In keeping with Moxley, Dumbridge and Najor-Durak’s (2013) emphasis on individualised support as crucial for retention, the PAT Scheme was designed to be extremely flexible and personalised in order to create ‘a greater sense of academic and social inclusiveness’ (Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews, Nordtröm, 2008, p.170). The PAT program was tailored to the academic needs of students who had a demonstrated gap in academic literacies or had failed to submit at least one assessment in the semester 1 foundation subject HUS1FAS – The Art of Being Human. In particular, the program fostered an environment that enabled students to accept assistance more easily,

answering the call for universities to implement pedagogies and informal support networks that increase student confidence and engagement (Lane & Sharp, 2014; Devlin, 2012; Karimshah, 2013). Furthermore, the scheme aimed to clarify academic expectations from lecturers and tutors, and create a sense of institutional inclusion and belonging based on ‘ethics of care’ (Lane & Sharp, 2014). The scheme fostered an environment where students felt comfortable enough to recognise their own academic needs and work toward improvement. Developing their confidence and self-awareness allowed students to see themselves as successful rather than fractured or deficient learners (Morda, Sonn, Ali & Ontsuka, 2007; Nelson, Duncan & Clarke, 2009).

Potential student participants in the scheme were selected after a careful analysis of performance data from the semester 1 foundation subject. All available data had been compiled into one comprehensive spreadsheet in order to identify a student’s level of disengagement against a range of indicators. The Personal Academic Trainers (PATs) searched for a variety of triggers indicating student disengagement, including ‘non-submission’ and ‘failed’ assignments; ‘failure to log on to the Learning Management System (LMS)’; ‘class non-attendance’; ‘not responding to emails’; and ‘no show for scheduled meetings’ (Harvey & Luckman 2014; Sopoaga & van der Meer, 2011). In addition, all students who attended the first class of the semester 2 foundation subject, HUS1TEN – Ideas that Shook the World, had to complete a short written task, which was used as a secondary diagnostic tool for finding students in need of academic support who had not already been identified as ‘at risk’. The diagnostic was particularly useful for capturing mid-year entry students for whom no record of performance at a tertiary level existed.

After the spreadsheet of ‘at-risk’ students was compiled, PATs assigned categories of risk to each student based on a combination of factors. Students who failed the semester 1 foundation subject were assigned to the highest category (1), as were those who had failed one or both of the major assessments but had passed the subject overall. Those who had not failed any single assessment but had consistently performed in the D range (50-59%) were assigned to the next category (2). All other students were assigned to the lowest category (3). ‘At risk’ students identified from the written diagnostic were assigned a special category. The spreadsheet was then sent to the subject lecturers who made annotations based on their personal knowledge of the students and their circumstances. Each category (1) student was automatically included in the PAT Scheme. Those lecturers who taught in first semester commented on individual students in categories (2) and (3), recommending those they considered at risk be upgraded to category (1).

Lecturers were in a unique position because, by teaching the complete BA cohort over two successive semesters, they could rely on previous acquaintance with students, their academic literacies and personal situations. This meant that, rather than relying exclusively on a low-threshold diagnostic, students at risk of under-performing could be identified with the help of previous results, assessment feedback and personal knowledge. Also unique to the scheme was that several PATs had already taught some of the undergraduate students in disciplinary subjects. This shared knowledge allowed PATs and lecturers to discuss individual cases and provide targeted and personalised student support.

The data analysis identified 126 ‘at risk’ students and 120 individualised letters were issued asking students to attend a meeting with their PAT (six students dropped out of

the subject before they could be contacted). Students were notified of their admission to the scheme with a personally addressed letter delivered to them by their lecturer after class in weeks 3 and 4 of the semester. The letters were discretely handed to students after class and lecturers offered recipients a chance to discuss the scheme and their academic progress personally at this time. Students were told that the scheme was an opportunity and discouraged from thinking of it in punitive terms. This process was designed to capitalise on the established relationship between the lecturer and the student because research indicates that individual treatment of students and positive academic-student relationships build student confidence (Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005, pp. 716-8). The letter introduced the PAT and invited the student to attend a session at a specific date and time based on their timetable, which the PATs could access via Allocate Plus. Delivering the message to students in a letter, rather than to the student's seldom-checked email account, was designed to force engagement with the message and also convey that the scheme was not just another non-personalised support service.

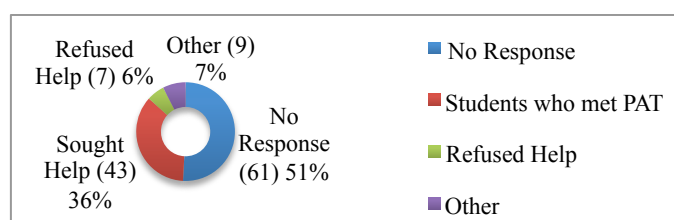


Figure 1. Student Responses to Invitation Letter

PATs followed up students who were not in class to receive their invitation letter or did not attend the first meeting via email and SMS. The response rates can be seen in Figure 1. Repeated attempts to contact students mimicked procedures used by LTU's AEWS and were aimed at countering the potential sense of anonymity at a university with over 30,000 students. Students' reactions to invitations varied. Some initially expressed concern they were 'singled out' for poor academic performance; others appreciated the offer of personalised assistance. In many instances, explaining the project as a new initiative and an exceptional service relieved student apprehension about participating. This supports Moxley, Dumbridguez & Najor-Durack's (2013, p. 19) findings that students respond better if they experience 'retention as if the institution set out to customize the approach specifically', instead of targeting students 'in a negative sense'.

Discussion

Research demonstrates that students are not good at identifying when they require assistance. A recent study by universities in South Australia reveals that, while 86.6% of commencing students consider themselves capable students, only 64.4% meet their own expectations.² The PAT Scheme subtly assumed a sense of authority that helped students to seek assistance by simply responding to an initial meeting request from their advisor. The approach guided students to make their own choice about seeking

² This study was conducted as part of the *First Year Student and Staff Expectation and Experiences Project* in collaboration between the University of Adelaide, Flinders University and the University of South Australia. The research outcomes of this project can be found at <http://fyhe.com.au/projects/student-staff-expectations-and-experiences/>

assistance and exemplifies a proactive, rather than a reactive, support system (Stephens & Myers, 2014). Less than 50% of the students invited to join the PAT Scheme chose to participate, but those who did achieved significantly better results overall. The data has been divided to reflect three categories of students: 'Non-responders', 'non-participants' and 'participants'. Of the 120 students contacted by the PATs, 61 did not respond to any contact (non-responders); 31 responded to initial contact but refused assistance (non-participants); and 28 sought continued support throughout the semester (participants). Of those who sought contact 51% only met with their PAT once, 24% 2–3 times, 14% 4 times and 12% between 5 and 10 times.

At the first meeting 23 students identified a specific issue they were struggling with: 13 were experiencing general personal problems, including financial, housing and domestic issues; 7 identified mental/health issues and 4 were EAL students struggling with language skills. The PATs offered a chance to talk about these issues, but also discussed strategies to overcome and/or manage the full range of academic skills, including time management, note taking, research, essay writing and referencing. All participants were entitled to semester-long support, and follow-up appointments were scheduled as required.

Those 'at risk' students who did not respond to or participate in the scheme submitted fewer assessment pieces and were more likely to fail the subject than participant students. Non-participants were more likely to submit one assessment than non-responders but still significantly less likely to submit both assessments than participants: 62% of non-responders did not submit any of the major assessment pieces compared with 32% participants; 26% of non-responders submitted one major assessment piece compared with 53% of participants. This demonstrates that those who sought ongoing assistance were more likely to persevere with assessment tasks than those who did not participate in the PAT Scheme.

There were significant differences in grades attained by non-responders and participants: 3% of non-responders and non-participants achieved an A (80-100%) or B (70-79%) grade, while 14% of participants achieved the same result (Table 1). Non-participants did marginally better than non-responders, with a failure rate of 68%. This trend is evident in every grade range, with 18% of non-responders and 29% of non-participants achieving a C (60-69%) or D (50-59%) grade, while those results were achieved by 43% of participants. Overall, 79% of non-responders and 68% of non-participants failed the subject, compared with 43% of participants. These results clearly demonstrate that 'at risk' students who actively participated in the PAT Scheme were significantly more successful than those who elected not to. They also illustrate that even minimal interaction with the program correlated with better results and could reflect students' self-awareness of academic skills problems leading to greater student success.

	A/B (%)	C/D (%)	Fail (%)
Non-Responders	3	18	79
Non-Participants	3	29	68
Participants	14	43	43

Table 1. Grade Distribution

The success of the PAT Scheme lay in its personalised approach and the principle of close interaction between staff and the university's support services, which is characteristic of all LTU's first-year initiatives. Two examples may demonstrate the importance of close, trustful relationships between students and staff and close communication between all institutional participants (Braxton 2004, 2014). One student approached her lecturer several weeks into the semester—after 'at risk' students had already been identified—to inform her that she was going to withdraw from the BA. Her lecturer ascertained that the student was withdrawing due to a lack of confidence in her academic abilities and assigned the student a PAT. The student met and corresponded with her PAT ten times over the remainder of the semester and this support not only led to continued enrolment in the BA, but also led to a final A grade for the subject. Another student who participated was registered with Equality & Diversity Services for anxiety and had dropped out of her previous course because her requests for assistance had been met with little enthusiasm. After changing degrees, that student had severe doubts about her academic abilities. Her lecturer recommended she participated in the PAT Scheme. Working closely with her PAT and her lecturer, she managed to submit all assessments. Additionally, she gained confidence throughout the semester and successfully took part in a team presentation, which often poses a particular challenge for students with anxiety. In order to consolidate and build on these developments for success in her second year, the student was referred to Counselling Services where she gained further assistance.

Conclusions

The PAT Scheme has built a network of support for 'at-risk' students. This led to greater levels of success for participants than non-participants and non-responders. Additionally, participants were referred for further support to other centres and units across the university, so that they could continue to seek assistance after their participation in the scheme concluded. By attaching the PAT Scheme to an interdisciplinary foundation subject as a one-on-one service, students, with their PAT, could devise personalised schedules that addressed individual issues. The provision of individual, subject-specific and interdisciplinary assistance reduced issues associated with generic or discipline-specific skills support (Chanock, 2010). While the scheme is currently embedded within a BA foundation subject, the model is easily transferrable to other disciplines and even more advanced year levels.

The PAT scheme fostered a supportive and collegial environment for undergraduates, postgraduates and academic staff. By selecting postgraduates to undertake the mentoring, the scheme provided valuable mentoring and teaching experience, as well as the opportunity to work closely with junior academic staff. Looking to the future, clear evidence of student success will enable us to promote the scheme more effectively to a wider student demographic across the university. Integrated academic support reduces feelings of anxiety and failure and allows students to seek assistance by minimising stigma. Engaging reluctant students is a significant challenge, but if students are able to see student support programs, such as the PAT Scheme, as an integral and normal part of the first-year experience, then increased engagement should be possible.

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