Abstract

This practice report outlines the conceptual framework underpinning the HIPSTaRS: Holistic, Integrated Planning for Student Transition, Retention & Success Project at the University of Western Sydney. The project involved collaborative design between academic staff, and a range of professional staff to plan for implementation of an integrated and coherent curriculum, including a whole-of-course approach to assessment, and alignment of the curriculum to co-curricular activities and services provided institutionally. The goal was to ensure that student experiences, including information received was consistent, clear, congruent and self-reinforcing. The challenges and complexities experienced in implementing pilot projects within two large undergraduate programs are outlined.

Introduction

In May 2013 the University of Western Sydney instigated an institution wide project entitled – StaRS – Student Transition, Retention Success tasked with leading and facilitating a coordinated institution-wide approach to first year experience and transition as advocated by Kift, Nelson & Clarke (2010) and others. Our starting point, as described by Gill, Lombardo & Short (2013) was recognition that whilst there were a range of programs across the institution to support student transition, the approach could most accurately be described as “piecemeal” or “discrete” in nature. This is not an unusual situation across the HE sector, fitting the description provided in 2005 by Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis (2005), and again in 2010 by Kift et al who noted that “piecemeal” remains the “most apposite descriptor FYE initiatives reported nationally and internationally…Institutions still struggle with cross-institutional integration, coordination and coherence” (p.2). Our experience thus far confirms this notion of “struggle”. The sheer size, complexity and distributed responsibilities and accountabilities which necessarily characterise large, complex institutions such as universities, contributes to this struggle. This practice report outlines some of these struggles – the challenges and complexities which became evident in pilot projects within two large undergraduate programs where we sought to implement a holistic, integrated and coherent approach to the planning of the total student experience designated the HIPSTaRS project.

Background

A review of activities across the university demonstrated what might be described as an academic – non-academic, or curricula – co-curricular gulf in our approach to the first year experience and transition. Strategies and programs were developed and implemented within HIPSTaRS: Holistic, Integrated Planning for Student Transition, Retention & Success - Nuts & Bolts.
non-academic professional departments of the university with variable, sometimes non-existent knowledge or understanding among the academic community of the presence or purpose of the program. Similarly, anecdotal evidence reported through a number of services (student mentoring programs and academic literacy support programs) was that student knowledge of services and programs available to support them was also variable and at time non-existent. The result inevitably is very patchy participation or involvement of students across courses and disciplines.

This is not to say that those developing the programs had not sought to inform academics, and indeed students, of their services. They had certainly used a range of strategies such as emails, presentations to key groups and meetings etc. However, provision of information out of context to the receiver, or at a time when it is not of immediate relevance and value will mean limited “stickiness” of the message. This is compounded by the sheer volume of “for your information” correspondence which occurs in institutions of the scale of universities.

The HIPSTaRS Project

The HIPSTaRS project arose as a result of seeking a framework which would help to overcome some of these challenges in a meaningful and sustainable way. Two of the ten STaRS project guiding principles described by Gill et al (2013) underpin conceptual framework (diagram 1), namely:

1. That the course curriculum provides the core connecting and meaningful construct to which student transition (and learning) is anchored, experienced and made sense of: Thus the need to align curricular and co-curricular activities (Kift, 2009) McInnis, 2001) in a self-reinforcing and congruent manner; and

2. Need for coherence, integration and coordination of initiatives and programs at the institutional level so that information provided to students and their experiences are congruent and self-reinforcing.

Our belief is that taking a truly holistic and integrated approach offers opportunities for enhanced efficiencies through value adding and alignment, as well as enhanced effectiveness – the sum can be greater than the parts!

At the centre of the framework is the curriculum. HIPSTaRS brought together a range of expert professional staff – Curriculum Advisors, Course Quality Officers, Academic Literacy Advisors, Maths Literacy Advisors and School Liaison Librarians to work collaboratively with the course coordinator and four unit coordinators to plan and enact a curriculum which was truly integrated, and coherent, including whole-of-course assessment planning. As the Higher Education Academy (2012) points out, the modularisation of courses, where units are often planned and taught in relative isolation militates against such an approach, something which HIPSTaRS sought to overcome. It became clear through this process that knowledge and awareness among academic staff of the concepts and skills taught across the units was limited, at times revealing incorrect assumptions about what students were learning in other units and when.

As a whole-of-course assessment schedule emerged, negotiations took place across units in order to ensure that the total assessment workload for students was manageable for a transitioning student, both in terms of total load and timing of the assessment tasks. A major part of the project was also the review of assessment information by a curriculum advisor and academic literacy advisor to ensure clarity and coherence across units and to make explanations clear in language commencing students can understand (Devlin, Kift, Nelson,
Smith & McKay, 2012). Academic and mathematics literacy skill development strategically and intentionally embedded within units; “Maths Start” workshops and resource booklets developed; annotated exemplars of student work developed wherever possible by the Literacy Advisor in consultation with the unit coordinator.

The outer circle identifies institution level co-curricular programs which support student transition and the first year experience and includes literacy support programs (Library Roving; Mathematics Education Support Hub programs; and services provided to students by Librarians); Peer-based programs including Peer Assisted Study Skills (PASS) and a mentoring program (MATES). The Transition Success project is a commencing student
contact & support service, based on a successful QUT program (Nelson, Duncan & Clarke, 2009). Trained senior student’s phone commencing students to check how they are coping and offer support and advice and clearly identifiable (labelled red shirts) “Ask Us” assistants circulate within the Library. First Year School Contact Officers (FYSCO) are professional staff introduced to students at orientation session to provide a “familiar & friendly face” accessible Monday to Friday to advise and assist students. (see Gill, Lombardo, Dlugon & Salamonson, 2011). Key stakeholders involved in these programs were connected into conversations and collaborative planning with some of the outcomes achieved being:

- Tailoring of the Transition Success script to each course cohort to enhance its applicability and hopefully student responsiveness;
- Integration of PASS sessions into the learning guide as an integral component of unit L&T resources; and improvement in timetabling of sessions through liaison with school professional staff in planning and identification of accessible school venues;
- Extension of the FYSCO role to include making phone contact with students identified as “at risk” (non-engagement with LMS; non-attendance; non-submission, or poor performance in 1st assessment). They will provide immediate advice to students and encourage them to consult with their first year advisor.
- Development of first year online course sites by Blended Learning Advisors providing key information and support materials enabling students to engage immediately after enrolment, prior to commencement of semester. Interactive practice tasks and activities enable them to become familiar with the course and university.
- All online unit sites have a consistent design, providing a consistent and coherent experience for students, assisting their navigation and access to information.
- Familiarisation of literacy staff in the Library Roving program with unit assessment tasks

**Challenges**

Two major challenges were confronted. The first is the sheer complexities involved and the need to coordinate multiple conversations and collaborations. Strong and strategic project management has been central to overcoming this challenge. Secondly, resistance from academics ebbed and flowed throughout the project. Convincing academics that spending the time and effort in “front-end” planning and quality improvement is “worth it” has been an ongoing challenge, as they feel that this is taking time away from other conflicting priorities. Senior leadership involvement has been essential to managing this challenge, including a willingness to engage with and assist in overcoming key issues of concern to academics wherever possible.

**Session outline**

The first 15 minutes of the session will be a presentation outlining the conceptual framework, the actions and initiatives implemented through the project, and the challenges faced. The presentation also reflects on known (interim) outcomes from the implementation phase in 1st session 2014. Attendees will then be asked to discuss in small groups the following questions:

1. What strategies are used in your institution to overcome the militating effect of course modularisation – what we have termed the culture of “Secret Unit Business”?”

2. How do you overcome resistance from academic staff who often see the time required to undertake the “front-end” planning involved in HIPSTArs as an impost on their time?
3. Are there particular strategies which have been successful within your institution to establish and maintain collaborative links, information flow and awareness, between the curriculum/teaching staff and co-curricular project providers?
4. Do members have ideas on how to evaluate the outcomes of such a holistic project?

The final five minutes of the session will be open discussion and feedback from the groups.

References


