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One more tier, no more tears: Students' perceptions of QUT Library's 2nd tier learning and study support.

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Abstract

This nuts and bolts session discusses QUT Library's Study Solutions service which is staffed by academic skills advisors and librarians as the 2nd tier of its learning and study support model. Firstly, it will discuss the rationale behind the Study Solutions model and provide a brief profile of the service. Secondly, it will outline what distinguishes it from other modes of one-to-one learning support. Thirdly, it will report findings from a student perception study conducted to determine what difference this model of individual study assistance made to academic confidence, ability to transfer academic skills and capacity to assist peers. Finally, this session will include small group discussions to consider the feasibility of this model as best practice for other tertiary institutions and student perception as a valuable measure of the impact of learning support services.

Context

QUT's institution-wide approach to first year experience and transition reflects the recommendations of Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis (2005) and is the basis for QUT Library's provision of centralised learning support and its active contribution to improving the student experience at QUT. The Library's integrated suite of learning services and resources targets undergraduate learners (particularly 1st year/transition) by offering 24/7 access to academic and information literacy and learning support in a framework which is holistic, 'one-stop' and student focussed.

This centralisation of study support, by the convergence of two disparate departmental portfolios, increases visibility and accessibility of services and professional staff for students. Demanding a degree of cross-professionalisation, the model maximises the capacity of the workforce to more widely support the development of student study skills with information literacy. It directly answers Kift's (2008) challenge that FYE is "everybody's business". At QUT, academic skills support has become normalised, open, positive and the responsibility of many.

One key initiative is a student consultation service called Study Solutions. This new service inserts a middle tier of learning and study support to complement existing person-to-person assistance for students at the Library service desks and with Academic Skills Advisors and Liaison Librarians. Study Solutions is the joint responsibility of these professional staff working together as educational partners to challenge learners' assumptions, establish and guide academic standards, and mediate across undergraduate, FYE and academic discourse (Elmborg, 2006; Kelleher & Laidlaw, 2009).

Service Profile

In first semester 2010, Study Solutions was introduced as a pilot service and became core business in second semester. Twenty-five minute, student-selected appointments allow for greater task analysis, shared problem-solving and facilitated application of solutions (e.g.: deconstructing an assignment task, planning writing structure). As a "Tier 2" service, Study Solutions extends the support provided by the Library Learning and Research desks ("Tier 1"). Librarians and Academic Skills Advisors work personally with individual students on study and research tasks and academic concepts and processes. This model mirrors Arendale's (2010) notion that learning support should reflect students' experiences of being on a "continuum between novice and master learner" (p. 2).

Differentiation: Study Solutions vs. other student consultation models

Many tertiary institutions provide one-to-one learning and study consultation services. However, traditional services are often perceived by students and staff alike as remedial and "as a form of crash repair shop where welding, panel-beating and polishing can be carried out on students' texts" (Chanock, 2007, p. 273). 'Go to' places (such as a centre or offices) where support is marginalised, academically and physically, have the potential to offer less relevant and responsive services for students transitioning through diverse pathways, and be more alienating to students with different abilities and self-perceptions. These increasing changes in student demographics will demand more support, more often, for more students in ways which are more appropriate to a wider range of courses and delivery modes. Study Solutions, in its highly visible location offering learning support across a range of contexts, responds to this demand and aims to normalise the concept of asking for assistance at university (Chanock, 2002).

The 'Student Perception Study'

Methodology

As part of the 2010 Study Solutions data management, permission was sought from attendees to be contacted for further feedback. Students who indicated yes, were emailed in semester one 2011. The proposed evaluation of the Study Solutions model was briefly outlined and they were asked to respond to ten questions via Survey Monkey. Questions were designed to gather quantitative and qualitative data. In order to explore their responses further, students were then invited to participate in follow up interviews.

Purpose

This study aimed to determine what difference this model of individual learning support makes to students' experiences in the first year at university. There were three main considerations:

- Was there an increase in academic confidence after using the Study Solutions service?
- Was there any transference of the skills learned to other academic tasks?
- Did students share the knowledge or skills they learned at Study Solutions with their peers?

This evaluation of Study Solutions sought to identify and measure the service's ability to engage student learning rather than merely provide information: what Chanock (as cited in Stevenson & Kokkinn, 2009) identifies as the difference between a 'service encounter' and a 'teaching and learning encounter'. Measuring the incidence of 'knowledge transfer; the ability of the student to reframe the knowledge gained to assist peers; as well as their increase in overall confidence level post appointment may reflect the ability of Study Solutions to contribute to the growth of the student's essential academic skills profile, rather than simply providing a stop-gap information solution to the presented problem.

Results

A definite improvement was reported in perceptions of confidence by students after attending Study Solutions. 56.1% of students had reported feeling not confident at all. This fell to 7.3% after attending. 41.5% of students reported feeling confident prior to their appointments, this rose to 85.4%, and 7.3% reported feeling very confident post attendance, up from 2.4%.

Students' areas of concern identified prior to attending Study Solutions can be classified into three main categories. Each of these categories contained numerous concerns. The three categories were: Understanding expectations - including deconstructing assignment questions and unfamiliarity with expectations and assessment criteria; Academic writing - including essay structure, paragraph construction and help with specific tasks such as literature critiques, grammar and language flow, clarity of expression; and information literacy - including finding resources and using databases.

The results indicate that Study Solutions was effective in addressing students' initial concerns of understanding expectations, academic writing and information literacy. 43.9% of students reported their appointments as very effective and 46.3% as effective.

"I was very lost when I started this degree. After the face to faces study solutions appointments I am now confident that I know how to start a task from the beginning and see it through".

In addition, a consistent theme was that students valued the face to face contact, reassurance and support they received in the extended appointments that had been limited at the services they had accessed previously. This reinforced the value of introducing the middle tier in the learning support model to complement existing services.

While it was pleasing that outcomes matched expectations, the survey attempted to ascertain the long-term benefits of this model of support. This was examined by firstly investigating whether students transferred skills and strategies to other assessment, learning and study tasks and secondly if they shared their new knowledge with their peers. 70.7% of students indicated they were able to apply the advice given in Study Solutions to other tasks.

"I used the advice provided to improve on the next essay in the same unit and also on subsequent assignments in other unit... Diamond structure for essay writing was very helpful".

“I needed help finding resources and the librarian helped me find articles with the online databases more effectively and I use those skills in all my assignments”.

58.5% of students used the knowledge, skills or strategies acquired at Study Solutions to then assist their peers. This included telling others about the Study Solutions service, showing students specific QUT Library resources, (particularly non first year students working with first years) and sharing strategies that had been personally useful. This willingness and ability of students to reframe and share knowledge and skills with peers, perhaps indicates a level of comfort with their own abilities and indicates that Study Solutions is succeeding as a true ‘Teaching and Learning encounter’ (Chanock cited in Stevenson & Kokkinn, 2009).

Conclusion

In line with QUT’s strategic focus on institution-wide approaches to enhancing the first year experience for students, QUT librarians and academic skills advisors assumed a responsibility to develop a new model (second tier) of learning and study support. This model expands traditional library practice as it broadens the capacity to provide academic skills support for students and creates a more visible and accessible service. Underpinning this is the notion of a shared duty of care for the student and mutual respect for the learning experiences of each student (Peacock, 2008). Feedback indicates that students are using and benefitting from the increased level of support offered by Study Solutions. Not only have confidence levels risen but transference of learned skills to other academic contexts and the willingness and ability to assist peers is consistently reported by students regardless of discipline, task or position on their ‘learning continuum’ (Arendale, 2010).

Session Plan

Time	Content	Details
0- 3 mins	Presentation of rationale behind the Study Solutions mode and brief profile of the service	Presentation
4-7 mins	Outline of difference between Study Solutions and other models of one-to one Learning and Study Support.	Presentation
8-15 mins	Overview of the student perception study and presentation of findings	Presentation of student feedback
16-30 mins	Facilitated small group discussion	Consider and discuss key questions Live collation of responses.

Key Questions for Discussion

Consider how a Study Solutions model might work at your institution. Who would be the key stakeholders? What resources would you require? E.g. physical spaces, learning resources. What are the potential barriers?

Is student perception and anecdotal feedback a valuable measure of impact? Or, should we only be considering the quantitative measures of performance when evaluating new initiatives in Learning Support?

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