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Who benefits most from peer support group? – First year student success for Pathology students

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Abstract

A myriad of interventions are required to maximize waning student success in higher education. A non-hierarchical peer support group for 'at risk' and 'non-at risk' students is a logistically advantageous form of mentoring that uses mentors from the same cohort. This method was implemented for first year Medical Radiation pathology students in 2014 and 2015 at the University of South Australia, as the 'Study Buddy Support' (SBS) scheme. Students identified as 'at risk' of failing the pathology course from their mid-semester quiz results and who participated in the scheme performed significantly better in the final exam, while those who studied independently did not. There may be a similar positive trend in those who were not considered 'at risk' but participated in the scheme. Implementation of the 'Study Buddy Support' (SBS) scheme is recommended for both 'at risk' and 'not at risk' first year students across disciplines.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Assistance in first year necessary to maximise the rate of success in higher education

In modern mass higher education there is a lamentably high dropout rate and timely completion (< 5 years) is as low as 60% (Andrews & Clark, 2011; Twigg, 2009). It is widely acknowledged that student retention and success in higher education is heavily shaped by the experience in the first semester of study (Thalluri & King, 2009; Twigg, 2009). Four major recurrent problems leading to termination of studies have been highlighted by students in Australia (McInnis et al., 2000; Zeegers, 2001; Zeegers & Martin, 2001). There has been success in combating the perception of overloaded curriculum and insufficient teaching with attention to transition pedagogy, such that students feel guided in their new endeavour (Wilson & Lizzio, 2012). Loss of interest in the chosen area of study is potentially difficult to address, but emphasis on relevance has enhanced student satisfaction and improved learning outcomes (Thalluri et al 2006). Inadequate advice on overcoming academic problems was another issue raised, and prompts attention to flexibility in the learning environment. Furthermore, timely diagnosis and appropriate support has proven beneficial for students at risk of failing or dropping out (Park & Choi, 2009; Thalluri, 2016). Upon receiving early attention from the academic staff and the university, students reported a more positive experience throughout their first year of university and were less likely to withdraw from their course (Thalluri & King, 2009). It is evident that students benefit from assistance in developing the broad variety of skills necessary for success in higher education, including foundational/assumed knowledge, study skills, and social and academic engagement.

The UniSA Learning and Teaching Unit (LTU) aims to help students succeed in their learning by providing assistance in a variety of forms such as appropriate pedagogies, advisory services, and orientation activities (Benson et al., 2009; Penman & Thalluri, 2014). The 'Study Buddy Support' scheme is a key program that has been introduced to assist students in a smooth transition to university studies (Thalluri et al., 2014).

1.2 The 'Study Buddy Support' (SBS) scheme

The effectiveness of peer mentoring in aiding successful transition to higher education is well established. There are many types of mentoring or coaching that aim to improve student happiness, success, and retention in the first year of higher education (Andrews & Clark, 2011; Heirdsfield et al. 2008). Traditional methods are hierarchical, in that the mentor or coach is senior in age, experience, or both (Andrews & Clark, 2011), however this appears to be a logistically inefficient structure due to study/clinical placement commitment clashes. The 'Study Buddy Support' (SBS) scheme was implemented because it uses an innovative non-hierarchical structure, in which an outstanding student coaches a small group of struggling students within the same cohort in science courses of nursing and midwifery programs (Thalluri et al., 2014). In this structure, both Buddies (mentees) and Buddy leaders (mentors) have same study goal and so both parties are benefitted. This enables staff to provide this service free of charge which minimises obstacles to joining the scheme (Thalluri et al., 2014).

The SBS scheme is a targeted style of peer mentoring, wherein the main thrust is peer tutoring in both course-specific knowledge and more general approaches to study. It aims to provide more personalised and interactive teaching/learning, demonstrate ways to manage the size of the curriculum, and provide advice on overcoming academic problems. Further projected benefits of the scheme include enhanced engagement with both the course and fellow peers within the course (Colvin, 2007; Thalluri et al., 2014). In this way the scheme aims to provide a positive experience for first year students, and thereby increase student retention and success in the program and in their future professional life.

1.3 Implementation of the 'Study Buddy Support' (SBS) scheme

The 2014 and 2015 cohorts of the first year pathology course in the Medical Radiation Science undergraduate program at the University of South Australia were chosen for the SBS scheme. The first course assessment, a quiz (15% of the final grade), was administered in week 5. 'At risk' students (those who got 60% or less in the quiz) were invited by the course coordinator via email to become a buddy. A second round of invitations were sent to the 'non-

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