More than Generic Skills: Systematic Integrated Learning Advisers (SILA) Supporting First Year Students in Low Retention Courses

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This paper describes an innovative academic support program known as the Systematic Integrated Learning Adviser (SILA) program. The preliminary findings from the initial evaluation of the pilot program are discussed and a number of successes and challenges are identified. This study highlights possibilities for improved outcomes for both students and teaching staff when an integrated and embedded approach to the provision of learning support is undertaken in a systematic manner.

Introduction

This "Nuts and Bolts" paper discusses the implementation and preliminary outcomes of a 'new' model of academic support (known as the Systematic Integrated Learning Adviser (SILA) program) provided for first year students in courses experiencing low retention and/or an enrolment profile that includes high proportions of students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds. The paper begins with a brief outline of the current policy landscape as the impetus for change. It then describes the implementation of the SILA program and identifies the early outcomes of the program. The paper concludes with a summary of the challenges and opportunities identified from the first semester of operation.

Background

Higher education in Australia, as in many OECD countries, is currently experiencing a period of rapid reform. The Australian Government's policy response to the *Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008), *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System* (Australian Government, 2009), has affirmed a sharp focus on increasing the participation in higher education of students from diverse backgrounds – including low socioeconomic status (SES), regional and remote, and Indigenous students. Additionally, in response to the increasing globalisation of higher education, Australian universities are enrolling significant numbers of international students for whom English is an additional language (EAL). With increasing numbers of students from non-traditional backgrounds entering university, knowledge of academic discourses and fundamental academic skills can no longer be assumed (Ljungdahl, Maher, Buchanan, Currie & Staveley, 2012). While such reforms are a welcome move to a more equitable and inclusive higher education system, they pose a range of challenges for teaching and learning in higher education.

Research shows that success and retention of university students are related to a range of factors (Jones, 2008; Long, Ferrier and Heagney, 2006), not all of which are within the control of the institution. One such factor is underpreparedness for university study, including English language proficiency. Marginson (2012) suggests that English language proficiency (ELP) is a 'problem' for one-third of the students in Australian higher education institutions, constituting an 'unmet need' on a large scale. The ways in which universities meet the needs of students while maintaining high standards in tertiary education is a 'thorny' issue but one

which must be addressed in order to ensure that commitments to equity and social justice are more than rhetoric.

At James Cook University (JCU), as at many Australian universities, academic support has traditionally been offered through university-wide generic skills workshops, some course-specific workshops and individual consultations coordinated through a centralised service (Harris & Ashton, 2011). This model has been shown to be inefficient in reaching those students most requiring support (Arkoudis & Starfield, 2007) and in providing contextualised, discipline-specific content (Wingate, 2006). Recent research (see Harris & Aston, 2011) has shown that models of support that are "embedded and integrated" (Harris & Ashton, 2011, p. A.80) within specific disciplines and courses can be highly successful, resulting in improved outcomes for students and improved assessment practices within subjects and courses. It is this notion of discipline-specific support, embedded within core first year subjects, that informs the Systemic Integrated Learning Adviser (SILA) program at JCU.

About James Cook University

James Cook University is a multi-campus regional university with approximately 20 000 students. The largest campuses are in Townsville and Cairns with additional campuses in Brisbane, Beijing and Singapore and smaller study centres located in Mt Isa, Mackay, Atherton, Malanda and Thursday Island. The four Faculties at JCU offer courses in a range of delivery modes including internal, external and facilitated through the study centres. In 2011, the majority of students attending JCU were first in family to university with over 70% of new students aged over 19 years (37.6% aged 20-25 and 26.7% aged 26-45). Of the overall student population, 19.6% were from low SES backgrounds, 24.3% from regional and remote areas and 3.7% of students identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Australians. It is clear from these statistics that JCU has a highly diverse student cohort that strongly reflects the move to widening participation and building community capacity through higher education. As such, the success and retention of underprepared students is a key concern for all staff.

Operationalising the SILA program

In response to the academic needs of the diverse first year cohort at JCU, the Teaching and Learning Development Unit – with the support of each of the Faculties – developed the SILA program. In the program pilot, the Associate Deans of Teaching and Learning nominated six undergraduate degree courses: Arts, Education, Psychology, Business, Nursing and Sports and Exercise Science. These courses were chosen based on retention, achievement and student profile data. Two core first-year subjects were targeted in each course, and Subject Coordinators were invited to take part in the SILA pilot. Participation was entirely voluntary as the willingness and interest by Faculties, Schools and academic staff to embed learning support into strategic subjects was deemed crucial to the success of the initiative.

A Learning Adviser was assigned to each course and allocated 60% of their workload for this project, their remaining time directed to providing support to all students at the university through traditional 'generic skills' activities and one-to-one consultations. The Learning Advisers worked closely with each Subject Coordinator to broker a SILA Agreement for each subject. These formal agreements outlined the joint responsibilities of the academic and learning support staff, and indemnified the latter against any unrealistic expectations from both academics and students in the provision of service. The details of the Agreements varied

from subject to subject, Consistent across all courses was that the Learning Adviser administered and marked a Post-Enrolment Language/Numeracy Assessment (PELA/PENA) and developed (or possibly co-developed) a suite of discipline-specific support activities based upon the results of the PELA/PENA and informed by first year experience research findings.

The support took a two-pronged approach, with specific support directed towards underprepared students as well as whole cohort support for the development of discipline-specific literacies and numeracies. For underprepared students, these activities included targeted workshops and individual consultations with students who had faltered in the PELA/PENA, failed an early assessment item, or were repeating the subject. For the whole cohort, these discipline-specific activities included modeling annotated exemplars, deconstructing relevant genres, recognising learning styles and preparing for exams. Across the various delivery modes, these activities were undertaken via combinations of online modules, screencasts or online sessions in Blackboard (via Collaborate), team teaching in lectures and/or tutorials, targeted workshops, common discussion times, LibGuide development and the facilitation of study groups.

The SILA program provided three tiers of support: Learning Advisers, Peer Advisers and Mentors. As previously mentioned, the overarching support came from Learning Advisers who were assigned to a particular course, however this proved a challenge as JCU delivers subjects in multiple modes across several campuses. The geographic realities meant that the online learning environment became an important space for the delivery of support, and this was supplemented by periodic travel by Learning Advisers to other campuses where the nominated subjects were delivered. The multiple campuses also necessitated the use of Peer Advisers to facilitate study groups and deliver weekly face-to-face workshops designed by Learning Advisers. The Peer Advisers were recruited based on recommendations from Subject Coordinators, and most often were senior students with a record of high achievement in the relevant SILA subjects. The third tier of support came in the form of the Mentor Program – a long-established social support program – with Mentors promoting the suite of SILA support options to relevant students in their school.

Evaluation methodology

The evaluation process received ethics approval from the JCU Human Research Ethics Committee and will continue through to the end of 2013. The process is guided by an interactive evaluation approach (Abma & Widdershoven, 2011) and is serving to inform decision-making and practice in the ongoing provision of learning support services. Data gathering occurs at the conclusion of each semester, when quantitative and qualitative data is collected, collated and analysed. A range of data collection tools is being employed, including: semi-structured interviews with stakeholders (i.e., students, teaching staff, Learning Advisers and faculty staff); brief electronic surveys of key stakeholders (students and teaching staff); and descriptive statistics from JCU databases.

Additionally, at the completion of each study period the Learning Advisers complete a report using a pre-determined template. The analyses of these datasets provide an ongoing evidence-base for research into the initiative and the initial datasets provide the basis for the following discussion of the preliminary outcomes.

Impact of the SILA program

While the SILA program and the analysis of its impact is still in the preliminary stages, evidence from the data collected at the time of writing this paper indicate a range of initial successes for the pilot. Such successes include:

- Improved collaboration between Schools and Teaching and Learning Development (TLD).
- Perceived reduction to workload for teaching staff.
- Improved capacity for strategic interventions to improve success and retention based on fine-grained data analysis.
- 'High touch', that is increased capacity to interact with high numbers of first year students. For example, jointly, the embedded Learning Advisers had direct contact with over 2000 students (internal and external) over the course of the semester and were able to actively promote TLD services to students. This is in direct contrast to the previous model of support that relied largely upon students self-referring.
- Equitable provision of support to external students. Learning Advisers are able to provide a wide range of support services to external students that previously were available only to internal students or with limited availability for external students.
- Focused academic language and/or numeracy support based upon reliable diagnostic testing.
- Flexibility of access to support services. Learning Advisers reported a high level of usage of online resources by internal students. For example, in the School of Business, the online SILA resources received over 6050 hits from internal students whereas only 35 out of these 825 enrolled students attended face-to-face workshops.

While the benefits of a dedicated Learning Adviser as identified above have begun to emerge, the SILA program also encountered a number of challenges in its first study period. These challenges included:

- Limits to strategic planning due to compressed implementation timelines. In some subjects, curriculum documents (e.g., Subject Outlines) were already published prior to the negotiation of the Agreement – thereby limiting opportunities to engage academics in discussions about assessment issues relating to university policy.
- Assessment practices in some subjects limited the opportunities to signal the importance of discipline-specific literacy and numeracy skills. For example, some SILA subjects relied on a limited range of assessment strategies such as multiple-choice tests limiting the opportunities for addressing the development of communication practices.
- The promotion by some academic staff of attendance as 'optional' for internal students. In these subjects, limited attendance had a critical impact on engagement with in-class diagnostic testing, as well as attendance at the on-campus workshops and study groups. This culture of disengagement was of particular concern to Learning Advisers in relation to critically underprepared students who required more engagement rather than less in order to succeed.
- Limited engagement by students most in need. As reflected in the research literature students most in need of assistance were least likely to seek or engage with support.

This first experience of the program has served as a 'pilot' from which to build an understanding of good practice grounded in experience. The Learning Advisers met regularly through last semester and sought guidance from external experts to formulate strategies to combat the challenges highlighted. In 2013, these recommendations are being implemented,

and will no doubt form part of a culture of continuous improvement of the Systematic Integrated Learning Adviser program.

Issues for discussion

1. Funding for initiatives such as SILA rely on evidence of improved student outcomes, but can we make conclusive claims that programs such as SILA make a difference to student retention and achievement when so many factors can influence these outcomes for cohorts from semester to semester?
2. How do we ensure identified students engage with learning support, and do reward and punishment strategies work?
3. When working across campuses and across various delivery modes and with tightening financial resources, what is the future for one-on-one consultations and on-campus workshops?

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More than generic skills: Systematic Integrated Learning Advisers (SILA) supporting first year students in low retention courses. Nuts and bolts presentation.