Peer Interaction in the Transition Process
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Abstract
The establishment of peer and academic networks prior to the start of the semester is a key factor in assisting the transition process for new students. Transition programs aim to reduce anxiety levels and provide an insight into academic learning skills as well as to introduce students to university culture, processes and terminology. One of the strengths of James Cook University transition programs has been the way in which mentors have been able to discuss the culture of the University from a student’s point of view and offer advice based on their experience. An analysis of the different levels of peer interaction operating in these transition programs shows the benefits of the collaborative and communicative processes involved. A balance of peer interaction, Learning Adviser supervision and academic staff involvement can result in increased student engagement in successful learning communities. This paper argues for continued evaluation of transition programs, effective communication of the results, collaboration between support staff and academic staff, and ultimately, the embedding of transition and peer mentoring programs within an institution-wide approach to the first year experience.

Keywords: transition, peer interaction, mentoring

Introduction

Students see programs that involve a high level of peer interaction as being the most useful in helping them address transition issues. This paper analyses the different levels of peer interaction in the transition process at James Cook University (JCU).

Transition programs at JCU include the following:

- A comprehensive and long established Student Mentor Program (Treston, 1999)
- A Learning Centre in which student mentors, Learning Advisers and other support staff work collaboratively to support individual students, groups of students and encourage the formation of learning support networks (Calder, 2002)
- A suite of online and face-to-face academic skills workshops including an online mentor facility
- Faculty specific transition programs conducted in the week before Orientation Week (Calder, 2003a)
- University preparation courses for prospective students

The implementation of these initiatives has helped establish a collaborative and productive relationship amongst academic staff, support staff, Faculty administrators and student mentors. In order to maintain institutional support for transition programs it is essential to communicate how the programs are monitored and evaluated. To help understand why students and other stakeholders perceive these programs as helpful, reflections of participants, mentors and academic staff involved in transition programs in 2003 are included throughout the paper.

All stakeholders contribute to the ownership of these programs. The student mentors play a prominent role in the planning and delivery of information, the academic staff deliver discipline specific content and the Learning Advisers train mentors and facilitate the monitoring and evaluation process. This monitoring and evaluation has revealed the extent to which peer interaction plays a vital role in the programs.

Monitoring and evaluation of transition programs

The ongoing evaluation of all transition programs at JCU adopts what Kalikoff (2001) describes as a ‘mosaic’ of evaluation techniques to monitor, evaluate and report on these programs.

- All participants of the transition programs complete a standard course evaluation form.
- All participants are E-mailed at the end of their first semester and asked to again reflect on the value (or otherwise) of the transition program they completed. They are also asked to provide any feedback at all about their experiences after one semester at university.
Facilitators of pre orientation transition courses circulate contact details of all participants (with consent) to assist groups to remain in contact and provide feedback on progress.

The mentors, support staff and academic staff who have contributed to the programs are also thanked via E-mail for their contributions and invited to provide feedback and comments on the programs. The mentors often provide very detailed reflective pieces with a view to improving the programs in subsequent years. Selections from these feedback mechanisms from participants and facilitators have been included in this paper.

Learning Advisers meet with all Academic Advisers throughout the year and gather feedback on this and other transition initiatives involving Learning Advisers and student mentors.

The academic history of all course participants is also tracked in order to establish retention and academic success data.

Focus groups are established where academic staff and external experts are asked to provide feedback about various transition initiatives to Learning Advisers, mentor leaders and senior management within the Academic Support Division.

A mentor facilitator (a senior mentor who is employed on a part-time basis) organises mentor training, coordinates Faculty mentor leaders and conducts surveys of both mentees and mentors.

It should be remembered that the evaluative and monitoring processes described above are as much about communication and collaboration as they are about number crunching. Such communicative processes, especially with new students, are also about recognising that transition is not just a three-day, or even one-semester issue. When Kantanis (2000) demonstrates that social transition underpins successful academic transition to university, she cautions us not to end up dehumanising students when attempting to objectify problems and search for solutions. We accept that institutional administrators want to ‘see the data’ but in the process of gathering both quantitative and qualitative data, we establish and maintain an ongoing dialogue with all of the stakeholders involved in addressing issues of transition and retention. In this sense, JCU transition programs have evolved over a period of time through a process of participatory action research (McTaggart, 1997).

Carmichael (2003) supports a ‘mosaic’ approach to evaluation and presents arguments for a combination of quantitative and qualitative techniques to ‘quantify’ as well as ‘qualify’ research results in relation to mentor programs but she highlights the importance of the in depth perspectives afforded by qualitative methodology.

As qualitative methodology is more time consuming and labour intensive, it would appear easier for LAS evaluators, and more convincing for the management of the institution, if evaluation reports only used the quantitative/numerical approach. However, it is often the anecdotal comments on student surveys, telephone calls, or emails which overtly demonstrate the value of the program, suggesting that in depth, qualitative research is important as a rich source of understanding of the processes of student development through their involvement in the program (p. 5).

Peer interaction

An analysis of the different levels of peer interaction in two Faculty specific JCU transition programs called Kickstart and Freshstart has recently been provided (Calder, 2003a). However, it is evident that, in a more general sense, there are three levels of peer interaction operating in the first year transition process:

- Interaction between the cohort of new students and later year students
- Interaction amongst the cohort of new students participating in the programs
- Interaction amongst the later year students participating in the programs

Peer interaction between the cohort of new students and later year students

The demonstrated strength of transition programs, according to participants, facilitators and University staff alike, has been the degree of ownership of the programs by the later year students acting as facilitators (Lewington, 1999). Furthermore, Clulow (1999) has shown that the reciprocity...
between new students and peer mentors can be more conducive to learning than the asymmetrical relationship between students and subject experts. The value of a high level of student ownership of the programs cannot be underestimated.

At JCU there is an attempt to maintain a collaborative approach to first year learning support through a balance of peer interaction, Learning Adviser supervision and academic staff involvement. Participant feedback, both immediately after and at the completion of one semester, has shown that there is overwhelming support for the quality and value of the information received in transition programs.

The support and handy tools provided have proven to be invaluable and without that confidence boost just before the commencement of semester, I doubt that I would still be enrolled.

The course exceeded all my expectations and provided me with awareness of what is required for my studies.

The enthusiasm and motivation given by the mentors was great.

Peel (1999) suggests that universities must look to their own particular institutional characteristics in order to design transition programs because many transition issues are specific to particular institutional environments and student groups. One of JCU’s institutional characteristics involves a culture of learning support strategies (Calder, 2002) integrated with a long established peer mentoring program (Treston, 1999). While academic staff and administrative staff play significant roles in JCU transition programs, the key ‘drivers’ of these programs are essentially the student mentors. Both mentors and participants endorse this aspect of the programs, where mentors have been able to discuss the culture of the University from a student’s point of view and offer advice based on their experiences. Treston and Hanley (1999) argue that advice given to students by other students is treated with respect and credibility. This can be illustrated by the quality of the following academic advice from a student mentor:

Because the students were concerned about their ability to cope with the workload and the requirements of their courses, the facilitators made sure they were aware of the various areas of support obtainable within the university organisation. Every effort was made to emphasise the friendly nature of the Cairns Campus. Because of its small size, lecturers were shown to be ordinary people who were approachable and had an interest in the student’s progress through the course. The support of the mentor program and the learning support staff was emphasised as much as possible. The importance of their peer group was an integral part of their studies and they were encouraged to form study groups.

Another facilitator provided these observations:

A focus of the program was on fostering friendship and creating a supportive network between the students to assist them in settling in. Small-group work was successfully employed to this end.

Another focus was to encourage individual student participation and interaction, as it is felt this is an important skill for successful tertiary study.

Peer interactions amongst the cohort of new students participating in the programs

As part of the evaluation and monitoring process of transition programs, all participants are contacted and asked to again reflect on their feelings about the programs at the end of their first semester. The value participants place on peer interactions is highlighted in the following:

I felt empowered. I also identified a lady there who just "felt right" to me and I extended the hand of friendship to her. We have been pretty inseparable ever since and push and pull each other along at times. I think without her I might have caved in to the anxiety early on. Trish and Jackie from the maths course appear to have a similar relationship and yet they did not know each other before that course.

The support network of friends that I made in Kickstart has helped me to settle in and feel like I "belong" in the environment. I am in regular contact with so many of those people and its nice to be able to see people around campus and have a chat. I offer encouragement when they need it and know that they will do the same for me when I need it. (As a mature age student that only knew one other person at uni, I was afraid that settling in and finding that kind of support network would be very difficult for me.)
Krause, McInnes and Welle (2002) have elaborated on the issue of student engagement and the role of peers and much of what we have learnt in recent years forms the guiding principles of first year transition strategies at JCU (Figure 1).

![Figure 1. The central role of peer interaction in the transition to university study (Calder, 2003b)](image)

The literature endorses the central role that peer interaction plays in the transition process:

- Peer interaction is the driving force in successful learning communities (McInnes, James & Hartley, 2000)
- Peer interaction is related to student effort and persistence and, ultimately, successful learning (Tinto, 1995)
- Peer interaction is related to students’ academic achievement, development and satisfaction (McInnis & James, 1995)
- Peer interaction and friendship networks assist students to adjust to their first year at university (Kantanis, 2000)

There is no doubt that productive learning communities (both informal and structured study groups) form as a result of the friendship groups established in transition programs but it is important to note that the forming of these groups occurs within a discipline specific framework that is unlikely to occur in orientation programs for mixed cohorts. Many students stress the importance of establishing peer networks prior to Orientation Week.

I have found it useful. I’ve met great people and it was really really good at the start of Orientation Week seeing those people you know. It was good knowing someone. Actually with the people from Uniprep, I even join up with them now and then for study groups which has been terrific.

I got an understanding of what to expect. I’m glad I did it a week before Orientation. I can come next week and be more comfortable with the surroundings and what’s going on and know what questions to ask next week at enrolment verification.

An additional dimension provided through these programs has been the establishment of academic networks. The students are able to interact with academic and support staff in an informal and friendly manner before they are officially welcomed to the university on their first day. As one mentor recently observed:

Students were impressed by the friendliness and approachability of academic staff and felt comfortable about future interaction. The lecturers were also impressed with the students, and enjoyed being involved with the program.

**Peer interactions amongst the later year students**

It is apparent that later year students who provide peer support gain enormous satisfaction and enhance some valuable generic skills as a result of their involvement in mentoring and transition programs.

Personally, I enjoyed the whole experience and believe I was exposed to some valuable learning which will assist me long after I have completed my degree and well into my career. In addition, I have made some valuable contacts with the new students and staff from within the university. The program is definitely a worthwhile experience for new students, current students, and University staff members.
There are significant collaborative and leadership skills required for later year students to perform the duties expected of them as mentors. These duties may include:

- Meet and host up to ten new students on their first day
- Contact these students (with consent) at weeks three, six and nine of the semester
- Be available to help other students if working in the Learning Centre
- Undergo training prior to learn about the role of student mentors
- Coordinate up to six other mentors and liaise with academic staff (if a mentor leader)
- Undergo training and deliver with a group of two other mentors, a three-day transition program (if a Kickstart or Freshstart facilitator)

Those mentors who do plan and deliver three-day transition programs appear to relish the opportunity to demonstrate or refine the skills that they have learnt in other aspects of their university study. The development of such graduate attributes is a significant outcome that is closely aligned to JCU’s strategic plan and demonstrates the multifaceted benefits of approaching the issues of transition from a student-centred perspective.

The academic perspective

The changing role of Learning Advisers or Language and Academic Skills (LAS) Advisers has been the subject of an ongoing debate for a number of years (Craswell & Bartlett, 2001). Whilst there is some lingering polarisation with regards to the effectiveness of individual consultations (Collins, 2003) versus a more academic staff development role (Skillen et. al., 2003), there is no doubt that closer collaboration with academic staff is deemed a desirable goal in assisting students through transition issues.

The JCU Learning Advisers regularly conduct formal interviews with key stakeholders involved in supporting first year students and these key stakeholders are predominantly Faculty Academic Advisers, Associate Deans, Heads of Schools and others involved and interested in the problems of transition and retention. A recent study has shown some lack of knowledge and concern amongst academics about the needs of first year students, as well as the value of mentoring (Waters, 2003), yet there has been considerable support amongst JCU academics for learning support strategies and the role of peer support in general. Perhaps this variation in attitude simply illustrates a range in the depth of understanding of teaching and learning issues amongst academic staff. Nevertheless, it is useful to highlight the views of some academic staff members who have been long-term collaborators with Learning Advisers in JCU transition programs.

One of the big advantages of the programs they run here at JCU is that student mentors basically run the programs. These are people who are current students – young students, mature age students, so they’re talking to the new students from their own experiences. So this is a big advantage rather than having academic or administrative staff running the programs. You get to hear from people who have gone through university, who are in university now – what difficulties and what issues they are confronting and they can talk about those issues to the students coming in (Head of Discipline, Sociology).

Working in the School of Education as a lecturer myself, obviously my students are focussing on the study of teaching, and the teaching and learning environment – and being conscious of the fact that when students come in to a new learning context as students, they have all kinds of unknowns and questions they want to ask. I think programs like Kickstart, Uniprep and various programs...help prepare them for that learning experience that may be new to them (Lecturer, School of Education).

Conclusion

Student engagement, social interaction and the facilitation of supportive learning communities are all enhanced through various levels of peer interaction and contribute to a student’s academic achievement and development. This peer interaction is evident between new students and later year students, amongst transition program participants and amongst the later year students themselves.
The central role played by peer interaction in the transition process must be made explicit when developing an institution-wide approach to first year experience issues. Strategies for achieving this approach will depend on:

- The ability of those involved to monitor and evaluate transition programs and effectively communicate the results to inform policy
- Senior management assuming ownership of the transition programs and the peer mentoring systems inherent in these programs
- A commitment to communicative and collaborative processes amongst all the stakeholders involved in transition programs

In the future, transition is likely to involve greater adjustment for students. Economic pressures on both institutions and beginning students will increase, and student engagement with university learning communities will continue to present challenges. Successful student engagement will necessitate informed policies that facilitate the type of peer networks and learning communities that this paper has shown to be important factors in the successful adjustment to university study.

References


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