Commencing students: Challenges and Supports

HEALTH, COUNSELLING AND DISABILITY SERVICES
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The demographics of transition

- Student examples
  18 year old school leaver with marginal TER, few friends, knows no-one at Flinders, struggles with academic writing, culture shock after loss of close support by HS teachers, history of severe depression for 2-3 years. High level of family conflict, long history of family poverty and unemployment. She is the first to attend Uni.
• 40 year old man, worked in building industry for many years, hasn’t studied for over 20 years, wants career change. Currently involved in high conflict Family Court battle with ex wife over children, trying to manage on Austudy to study full time. Feels ‘different’ to fellow students as much older than most of them.

• 28 year old man from Sudan, spent years in camps and ex boy-soldier. Severe PTSD but never properly treated. Struggling to adjust to uni culture, feels isolated. Very little experience with computers and not coping with the online requirements of his course.
• 18 year old school leaver, almost perfect TER, high achieving university educated family. She is perfectionistic, ‘driven’, highly anxious, works 2 jobs as well as full time study. Completely dropped bundle when first assignment came back with a low Credit.

• 26 year old female international student from Japan. Poor English, severe psychiatric problems are apparent including suicide thoughts. Estranged from family (sent to Australia?). Only knows two other Japanese students whom she occasionally speaks to. Speaks virtually no English outside of tutorials, where she rarely says a word. Lives alone, doesn’t leave flat except for uni and food shopping.
• Student resilience

Commencing university can be a highly stressful time. Making the transition successfully depends to a large extent on each student’s unique mix of protective and risk factors …

Protective factors

• Supportive family and environment
• Supportive campus environment
• Belief in self/self esteem
• History of success
• Sense of optimism despite the challenge
• Social skills/competence
• Develop a sense of belonging at Uni
• Access to support
Risk factors

- Poor social and problem solving skills
- Low self esteem
- Unsupportive environment
- History of failure
- Disability
- Mental health and/or drug:alcohol problems
- Financial stress and long working hours
- Poor access to or availability of support

Government’s equity priority

- The Rudd government has indicated its intention to dramatically increase the participation rate of low SES and other disadvantaged groups in higher education
Are we prepared?

• “Low SES and other under-represented groups of students are heavy users of academic and personal support services provided by universities, such as learning and language skill development, counselling and financial services. As a result the cost of educating a student from a low SES background with little family experience of higher education is higher than for a higher SES student”.

Review of Australian Higher Education, Bradley Report

Trends

• While most commencing students are resilient and make the transition, there is an increasing number of students commencing university who have often severe psychological or psychiatric problems (treated and untreated). This is a worldwide trend.
Depression and Anxiety

- 20% of population
- Peak age of onset for depression 16-25
- Impact on study and success
- Impact increases if other significant risk factors present and few protective factors

Health and Counselling Mood Project: A brief intervention

- Joint case management by doctor, counsellor and disability liaison officer
How we assist commencing students

• Time management, motivation and study planning
• Personal difficulties impacting on study
• Decision making
• Study accommodations
• Liaise with academic and other faculty staff
• Health matters

How we can assist staff

• Consultation/referral regarding students of concern
• Advice on student management
• Phone link, Monday - Friday 3.30 - 4.30, counsellor available
Disability Liaison Officer (DLO)

- Students with disabilities: DLO provides a full service including funding and advocacy
- Staff with disabilities: DLO is available for consultation - funding is from the relevant department

Legislation & Flinders Policy

Commonwealth:
- Disability Discrimination Act 1992
- Disability Standards for Education 2005

Flinders Policy on SWD:
- ‘Reasonable’ adjustment to teaching/assessment methods are made in such a way as to minimise disadvantage for SWD without providing a competitive advantage
- SWD are still required to meet the inherent requirements of courses
Disability Stds for education

- Making reasonable adjustments:
  - balance the interests of all parties (SWD, staff, other students, institution)
  - give regard to the nature of the disability; the views of the SWD; the effect on the SWD’s ability to achieve learning outcomes, ability to participate in courses, independence
  - maintain the academic requirements of courses
- Educational institutions must ensure SWD can participate in courses, and use the facilities & resources of the institution eg. FLO

What is a disability?

Common disabilities
- Chronic fatigue syndrome
- Depression / anxiety
- Chronic pain
- Vision / hearing impairment
- Specific learning disability
- Mobility limitations
- Acquired brain injury
- Temporary or ongoing illness or injury
DLO role

- Liaison with academic and other staff
- Specific services (print alternatives, scribe, Auslan interpreting)
- Equipment (CCTV, JAWS, Dragon, Text Help)
- Negotiation of appropriate adjustments to assessment & teaching methods
- Referral to other services (internal & external)

Process for students

**DLO service is confidential**

- Students must provide documentation
- DLO draws up an Access Plan with recommendations re teaching and/or assessment
- Students meet with teaching staff at the start of semester and provide copy of Access Plan - discuss recommendations - refer queries to DLO
SWD example …

Vision impairment
• SWD needs all print materials in 18pt on A4 paper - outsourced service - can take up to 3 weeks
- DLO gets readings from lecturer - send off campus - materials are scanned, reformatted, & emailed to H&C - H&C print and collate, notify student to collect (or post to student)

SWD example …

Hearing impairment
• SWD has cochlear implant - hears well in quiet venues - worried he could miss important info in lectures
- DLO checks with lecturers if lectures are recorded and streamed onto FLO - organises this if not - arranges FLO access for outsource person, who transcribes lectures from FLO and emails to student
SWD example …

Medical condition (chronic pain)
• SWD can’t read for more than 5 minutes - needs all print materials electronically so he can listen using screen-reading software
• DLO arranges e-texts from publishers - books of readings are sent out for scanning and emailed to student

Field/clinical placements

• Uni policy on Student Placements (includes guidelines for withdrawal of students)
• Access Plan not needed to reiterate statement from doctor
• Access Plan can recommend p/t v f/t, timing of shifts, type of setting
• Academics must be clear about ‘inherent requirements’ of placements
Difficulties for lecturers …

- Reading materials and texts should be available 4 weeks before start of semester (AVCC guidelines)
- SWD produces Access Plan for ext in June on work due May!
- How much leniency is appropriate?
- Re-formatting exam papers
- Putting information on FIO in accessible format
- Any others???

Uni responsibility:

- To give full and clear information about the requirements (including placement) of courses, in all course information, so that students can make informed decisions about their capacity to complete the course before they enrol.

‘Unjustifiable hardship’ - a uni’s only defence in not making accommodations for SWD
Further information

• Phone 8201 2118 (#12943 - DLO direct)
• Email health.counsel@flinders.edu.au for general counselling queries
• Email dlo@flinders.edu.au for general disability queries

www.flinders.edu.au/current-students/healthandcounselling/healthandcounselling_home.cfm