Approaches to supporting the transition of students from diverse backgrounds into the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Reflections on the Road

Dr. Stephanie Hester, Transition and Participation Coordinator, Faculty of HUMSS

Introduction

It has been suggested student ‘transition’ is best conceptualised as a process that commences prior to a student’s actual entry into higher education, and that prospective students in cohorts that are underrepresented at tertiary level, such as those from low-SES (LSES) backgrounds, benefit from having their transition journey supported as early as during their middle years of schooling [Gale 2011]. Students from LSES and other ‘non-traditional’ backgrounds also benefit from having their transition journey supported during at least their first year in higher education [Devlin et al. 2012]. This poster demonstrates how the practice of the HUMSS Transition and Participation (T&P) Coordinator has been shaped by the concept of transition as a journey. It also shows how the T&P Coordinator’s role has been strengthened by partnerships with others involved in transition practice, and considers the scope for further partnerships and Communities of Practice (COPs) to be established.

Role of the Transition and Participation Coordinator

Since 2009, the Transition and Participation Coordinator (T&P Coordinator) has coordinated initiatives to support students from non-traditional backgrounds both prior to and during their first year in higher education (FYHE).

Outreach Activities

Outreach programs in Communication Skills and Media for prospective secondary school / VET students in the predominantly LSES areas of Playford and Salisbury

University outreach programs can increase participation in Higher Education amongst LSES cohorts [Gale 2011]. Outreach programs are particularly valuable in outer-suburban areas, where tertiary institutions can have limited ‘visibility’ on the physical and cultural landscapes [Phillips 2012].

The HUMSS Study Skills Centre (SSC) promotes skills in academic literacies, research and critical thinking

Tertiary support services can increase the sense LSES students have of ‘belonging’ to a tertiary institution [Devlin 2012]. Services that support academic literacy can promote a constructivist approach to learning, where students from diverse educational backgrounds can connect their knowledge and ways of learning to that taught at the University.

Impact of Activities

Outreach activities conducted by the T&P Coordinator have been cited as playing a role in the increase of LSES enrolments into the Faculty of HUMSS.

The major bachelor degree programs in the Faculty of HUMSS have experienced a rise in retention rates in both continuing and commencing student cohorts from 2011 to 2012.

Discussion

- Transition to university poses challenges for most students, with a gap continuing to exist between first year students’ expectations and experiences. [Brinkworth et al. 2009]. Transition strategies that are effective in the support of LSES students are of value in the FYHE cohort as a whole [Nelson 2013].
- The role of the HUMSS Transition and Participation Coordinator suggests a potential alternative model for transition practice in which practitioners engage with students both prior to and upon entry to Higher Education.
- Tertiary transition practitioners who work with students from ‘non-traditional’ backgrounds, and the teachers and community groups that support them, are exposed to different points of view regarding the role, value and scope of tertiary education. This can lead to valuable reflection on the part of the practitioner about both their own approaches to learning and teaching and those of their institution. Devlin et al. [2012] recommend that practitioners working with LSES students be involved in discussions regarding tertiary curriculum design and scaffolding.
- There is scope for the tertiary sector to work more closely with secondary, community and vocational education sectors to support students in transition. While strong COPs exist within the secondary and tertiary sectors, there is perhaps greater scope for these to intersect with each other.

The HUMSS Transition and Participation Coordinator suggests a potential alternative model for transition practice in which practitioners engage with students both prior to and upon entry to Higher Education.

Supporting student transition through a partnerships model allows for the creation of programs that are:
- Relevant to students and student centred: ‘Stakeholders’ involved in the student learning journey, including students themselves, can be involved in the design and implementation of programs.
- Sustainable: Referrals and recommendation are made as appropriate; advice, information and good news stories are shared.
- Widespread: Entering into and/or creating COPs allows for the strengthening of practice and dissemination of information.
- Mindful and inclusive of the many ‘stakeholders’ (including teachers / lecturers, advisors and mentors) involved in student transition: Practitioners such as Devlin et al. [2012] and Gale [2011] stress the importance of including LSES student support networks, both internal and external, in transition journeys wherever possible.

Key Challenges of the role of the HUMSS T&P Coordinator

- To offer programs that are both relevant to students from diverse backgrounds and rigorous enough to support their transition;
- To provide sustained and sustainable support to students planning to undertake or undertaking a diverse range of degree offerings;
- To encourage student participation in the programs.

The success of the T&P Coordinator has come from the creation of a model that utilizes partnerships.

References


