A new undergraduate first year: Blended, flipped and engaging… timetabling is not a problem!

Key Words

First Year; Transitions Pedagogy; Student success; Attrition;

Abstract

Victoria University's 2016 – 2020 Strategic Plan highlights that we are a university of Opportunity and Success. This has led to a uniquely diverse student cohort compared to other Australian Universities. For example: 52% of VU students come from non-English speaking backgrounds, 57% are above the age of 20 at enrolment and a high percentage are low SES students with ATAR below 70. The range of data indicate that VU's incoming student cohort is increasingly underprepared for tertiary study, that attrition during the first year of study is a major concern and that a significant proportion of VU discontinuations occur at the beginning of a student's first semester. So, VU is now planning a new approach to curriculum with a customised first-year offering that will include a range of study support, employment preparation and extra-curricular elements. We are re-imagining the curriculum as boldly as possible in order to give our students the best opportunity to succeed. During the First Year consultations, several curriculum organisational and pedagogical principles were discussed which could explicitly build student transition from the previous educational experience to the current. These included student engagement, involvement and belonging, effective learning design, active and collaborative learning and teaching, assessment for learning, and a coherent, systemic structure. Whilst acknowledging the value of Kift's (2009) Transition Pedagogy's six principles and Lizzio's (2009) five senses which enhance student success, to be practical these all need to be contextualised and realised with specific student outcomes in mind. They indicate a curriculum designed with the intentional sequencing of knowledge, skills, attitudes and purpose. Thus the philosophy driving VU's new first year is predominately experiential with vertical connections to later years of study, the discipline, and the personal or professional journey; the horizontal connections are the experience of being a first year student at VU. Creating authentic learning environments that develop engagement and the potential of learners are by the far the most impactful on student learning gain, self-regulation and subsequent success in later years. Therefore VU's resources will be deliberately applied to the first year of study as compared to the later years of study. What does this mean for Academic Support and Development? I could argue that we already demonstrate Kift's principles in our teaching, that we are probably the most student-centred unit in the whole university, that we are flexible and experiential. We could be more explicit regarding Lizzio's senses involving here our student peer mentors. Currently I see two models: a credit bearing "Communications" unit of study and a non-credit bearing, but apparent in student timetables, program. The teaching will develop the attributes of success, be a mix of face-to-face and blended, taught by VU's ALL experts who are also extremely well-informed at the discipline level. The other critical component will be sharing learning experiences with student peer mentors. This presentation will open up for discussion various conundrums, one of the most frustrating being the "elephant in the room" that ALL experts are too expensive.

References

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