Addressing the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students

a case study of African students

Tina Fleming
Learning Consultant
Centre for Learning and Teaching
Edith Cowan University
t.fleming@ecu.edu.au

Vector cover vecteezy.com

Preview

- Brief overview of literature

- Close-up on Sudanese students

- Applying an ALL practice framework

- Bridging the gap: The Top Up program

- Implications for ALL practice

- Questions

The literature: a brief overview

- Diversifying student demographic in Australia (Turner, 2009)

- "non traditional students" *i.e. older, of diverse background, or as one who meets one or more risk of withdrawal factors such as studying part-time, working full-time, being financially independent, being a single parent, having dependents other than a spouse and/or not graduating from high school* less likely to complete studies (National Audit office, 2007; Provasnik & Okanty, 2008)

- These students come with varied and complex needs which impact on their learning experience

African students at ECU: A snapshot

Born in Africa: 2900 students

- Domestic   2009
- International   737
- Course completion rate 50%
- Pass rate 84%
- Weighted Average Mark (WAM) 51%

Sudanese make up 2% of African students
- Completion rate 27%
- WAM 43.5%

Key factors affecting learning of Sudanese students

- Social disruption due to impact of civil war
- Linguistic and cultural diversity in Sudan (over 70 different languages spoken)
- Predominantly oral culture with no written script in some formal languages
- Limited or interrupted formal schooling (Burgoyne & Hull, 2007; Turner & Fozdar, 2010)

Close-up on Sudanese students

Observations of Sudanese and South Sudanese students in **Faculty of Business and Law (2010 - 2014)** revealed:

- Low academic performance
  - Failure rate (47.53%) significantly higher than failure for Faculty (16.25%), despite Sudanese students completing the majority of assessments in units.
  - Most achieved a pass (50 – 59%) or credit (60 – 69%) with very few achieving a distinction (70 – 79%) or a high distinction (+80%)
  - The weighted average mark (WAM) was 60%
- Poor retention
  - 22.15% rate of withdrawal from units compared to Faculty average (14.4%)
  - Retention to completion lower than faculty average (30% do not complete). Main reason provided was 'academic reasons'.
- Sound oral skills but low English language comprehension and writing skills
- Poor time management
- Reluctance to attend learning support workshops, despite encouragement by academic staff

Research Project

- Collaboration between academic staff and learning consultants

- Funded by Faculty Teaching and Learning grant ($8000)

- Mixed methods approach: focus groups, interviews, surveys to measure English Language Confidence and Motivations to study (Vallerand et al., 1992)

- 22 participants
  - 12 male (54.5%)
  - 10 female (45.5%)
  - 90% entrance pathway through tertiary diploma
  - 71% first in family at university

- Research questions:

➤ What motivates Sudanese students to study at university?
➤ What are the students' confidence levels in relation to English language?
➤ How are the students performing academically (via grades)?
➤ What limits or demotivates students?

Our research findings

- Students place more focus on **extrinsic motivational factors** of university study e.g. future employment and community contribution

- **Incongruence** between students' confidence about their English language skills and actual grades and assessment feedback **caused confusion and frustration** (Kruger-Dunning effect)

- **Difference between past and present learning environments** i.e. high school and TAFE where there is less emphasis on academic writing and more teaching time **inhibited appropriate learning transfer**

- While students were motivated to **seek assistance**, they were more likely to do so through **informal supports** such as Sudanese peers or one on one meetings with learning consultants.

- **Socio-political factors** such as coping with trauma of war, having to work and study part-time, being the first in family to attend university, and family commitments were **barriers to learning**

Our research recommendations

- A more targeted program of support to orient students to the university environment and to realistically align their expectations

- Incorporate peer mentor programs to promote access to more experienced, successful Sudanese students who are more attuned to the socio-political factors affecting student learning and achievement. Peers can provide more appropriate advice and direction

- Greater access to Learning Advisors who can provide explicit instruction with developing academic and language skills.
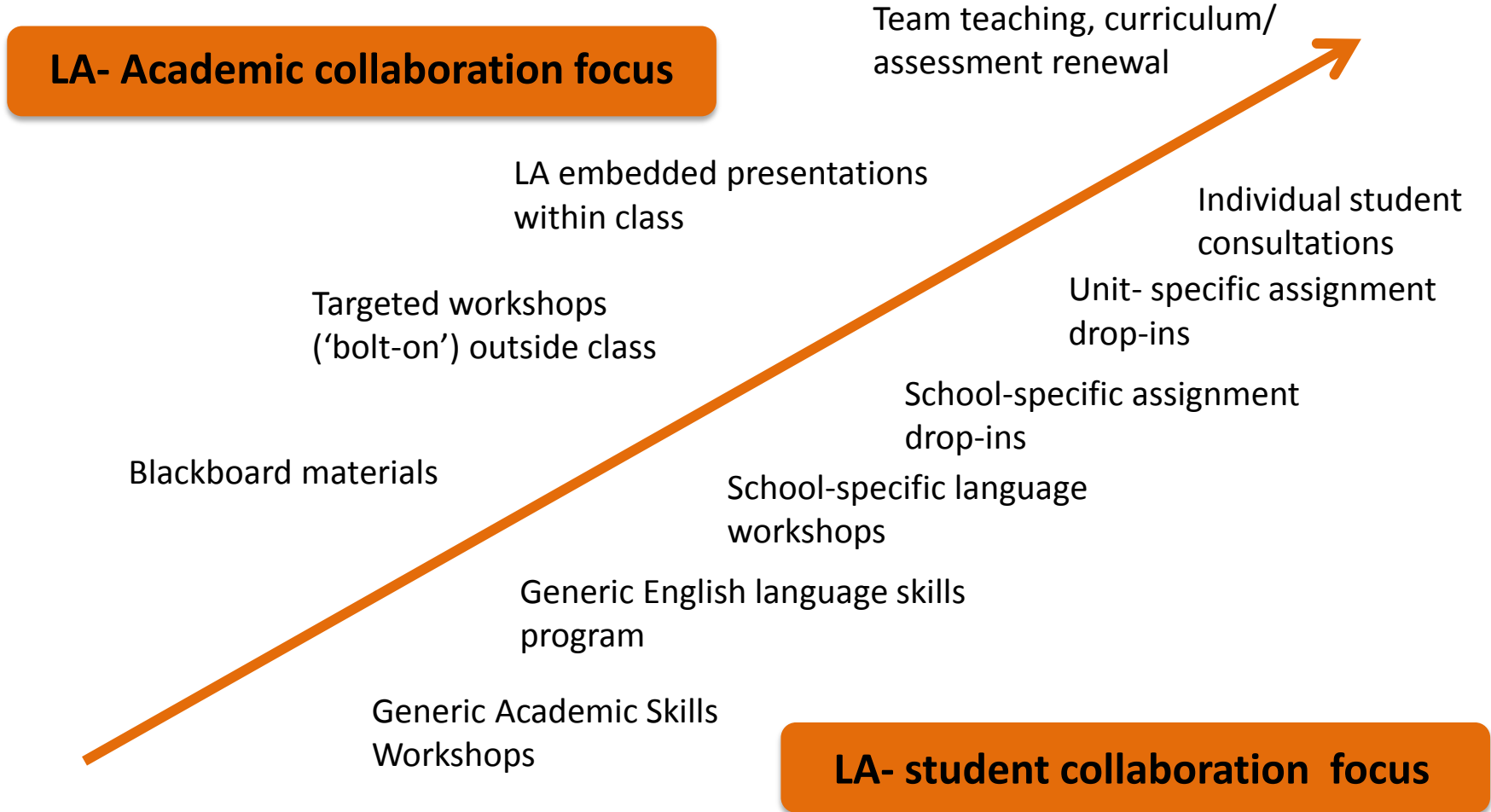
Principles of ALL practice

There is a need to:

- Equip students with knowledge-building principles and academic literacies principles: enable them to actively engage in chosen discipline –their 'community of practice' (Bush, 1997; Desierto, 2005; Gee, 1990; Ivanic, 1998; Street, 1984; Wenger, 2002)

- Teach students these principles and literacies explicitly (Bush, 1997; Desierto, 2005; Integrating the Teaching of Academic Discourse into Courses in the Disciplines, 1994)

- ALL practitioners are integral to equipping students with these knowledge-building principles and academic literacies (Baik & Greig, 2009; Buckingham & Wexler, 2013 (forthcoming); Harris & Ashton, 2011; Jacobs, 2005; Nunan, George & McCausland, 2000; Skillen, Percy, Trivett & James, 2001; Stappenbelt & Barrett-Lennard, 2008; Kennelly, Maldoni & Davies, 2010; Wingate, Andon & Cogo, 2011)

Continuum of embedding/ integration

LA- Academic collaboration focus

Team teaching, curriculum/ assessment renewal

LA embedded presentations within class

Individual student consultations

Targeted workshops ('bolt-on') outside class

Unit- specific assignment drop-ins

School-specific assignment drop-ins

Blackboard materials

School-specific language workshops

Generic English language skills program

Generic Academic Skills Workshops

LA- student collaboration focus

Adapted from Harris, A., & Ashton, J. (2011)

Bridging the gap: The Top Up program

A case management and peer-mentoring program targeted **at domestic African undergraduate students** (DAUS) *

Black Africans born in or with familial connection to sub-Saharan Africa

Five sub groups:

– Middle class professionals*

– Humanitarian entrants- born in Sub-Saharan Africa but fled war to Australia*

– Family reunion entrants*

– International students

– Australia-born-Africans-Second generation refugee students & children of middle class & international students*

• In response to ECU HEPPP report indicating 20% of African students withdraw from undergraduate programs

• Funded through HEPPP ($46 000 in 2017)

Specific objectives:

– Improve English language and conceptual learning skills

– Manage academic work, family and work commitments

– Develop clear career pathways

– Adjust to the Australian way of life

Piloted in Semester 2, 2015 in School of Psychology and Social Science

– 10 first, second and third year students

– Past and current ECU HDR African students employed as mentors (paid $38 ph)

Top Up: Four phases of implementation

1
- Project launch and development of project guidelines
- Project policies
- Criteria for selecting participants

2
- Consultation between project manager, academic discipline leaders, course coordinators & learning consultants
- Selection and briefing of mentors (mainly second year Bachelor degree)
- Promotion of project using flyers, snowball campaign and one-on-one
- Workshops with stakeholder input (students shared thoughts on how to address their needs)

3
- Selection of participants based on demonstration of academic needs (samples of previous assignments)
- Participants matched with mentor (based on course expertise and units in which enrolled)

4
- Implementation
- Component 1: Mentors dedicate 2 hours per week to prepare, plan and report on progress of each mentee
- Component 2: Mentors meet mentee once per week to discuss educational needs, assignments and support services
- Component 3: Weekly compulsory plenary session facilitated by Learning Consultants and Careers. Students taught language and academic skills, and career pathways.
- Component 4: Walk-ins – allows independent students seek help as and when required

Learning Consultant involvement

- LC and Program Coordinator collaborate in developing program for plenary sessions
- LC develops materials and resources based on knowledge and experience working with African students, as well as mentor feedback
- Explicit focus on academic and language skills but implicit focus is on enculturation to university system and 'life' skills
- Sessions involve 'workshopping' skills i.e. academic writing, paraphrasing, referencing (rather than grammar, etc.)
- LC promotes other services which leads to increased attendance at other LC offerings such assignment drop-ins

Outcomes

- Since 2015, program has supported 35 students

- Attendance at plenary sessions has averaged 70%

- 100% of students remain in the program

- Retention has improved. Of all students in the program, only 1 has withdrawn from university due to family reasons

- Students' English and language skills have improved through participation in plenary sessions. Mentors confirm this.

- Students' grades have improved

I got HD, two Distinctions and a Credit … So delighted and making progress.

Excellent news I have for you, I ended up achieving a Distinction in Social Policy! Thank you so much, God bless you for all the academic support throughout this semester!

Peer mentor and student perceptions

[View video](#)

Lessons learned about model of support

- Using a more **innovative targeting mechanism of identifying students** needing support due to their **unique circumstances** is more effective
- **A sense of shared community** plays a significant role in participation and retention in the program
- **Mentors who understand socio-cultural background** of mentees are more empathetic to needs and more persuasive in developing effective study techniques
- **One-on-one interaction created opportunity to understand the social context of the learner** and to adjust learning activities to suit learner needs
- Learning consultants had the opportunity to **deliver lessons to students who would not normally access the conventional support system**
- Mentoring relationship allowed for **greater flexibility in access to support** (just in time) and **increased confidence** to discuss academic and personal issues
- Increased self-confidence led to **increased assertiveness** i.e. willingness to seek assistance from lecturers, question grades, etc.

Implications for ALL practice

Should we be

- Becoming more informed, collecting data and conducting research on student diversity to justify the development and delivery of more culturally inclusive programs?

- Developing stronger collaborative partnerships with academic staff and students in the development and delivery of learning support to cater to diverse student cohorts?

- Applying for grants to work on projects that have high impact, preferably with a range of colleagues i.e. academic staff, learning designers, student services?

- Working more closely with student peers such as the Guild, Peer Mentors, Student Associations during orientation and throughout semester as a means of promoting our services?

References

Adusei-Asante, K., Awidi, I., & Doh, D. (2016). Improving retention and academic achievements of African students in higher education through community development. In *Proceedings of STARS Conference 2016.* Retrieved from http://unistars.org/papers/STARS2016.pdf

Adusei-Asante, K. (2017 under review). The impact of targeted educational programs on academic outcomes for African students in Western Australia. *Australian Studies Journal Coolaba.*

Burgoyne, U., & Hull, O. (2007). Classroom Management Strategies to Address the Needs of Sudanese Refugee Learners: Support Document--Methodology and Literature Review. *National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER)*

Gately, N. J., Ellis, S., Britton, K. & Fleming, T. (2017). *Understanding and Overcoming Barriers: Learning Experiences of Undergraduate Sudanese Students at an Australian University.* International Journal of Higher Education, *6*(2), 121- 132. doi:10.5430/ijhe.v6n2p121

Harris, A., & Ashton, J. (2011). Embedding and integrating language and academic skills: An innovative approach. *Journal of Academic Language and Learning, 5*(2), A73-A87

National Audit Office. (2007). *Staying the course: The retention of students in higher education.* Retrieved from https://www.nao.org.uk/report/staying -the-course-the-retention-of-students-in-higher-education/

Provasnik, S., & Planty, M. (2008). *Community Colleges: Special Supplement to the Condition of Education 2008. Statistical Analysis Report. NCES 2008-033.* Retrieved from Washington http://nces.ed.gov/help/orderinfo.asp

Turner, M. (2009). Adult South Sudanese students in Australia: The significance of congruence between student and teacher expectations. *Prospect, 24*(3), 48-59

Turner, M. & Fozdar, F. T. (2010). Negotiating 'Community' in Educational Settings: Adult South Sudanese Students in Australia. *Journal of Intercultural Studies, 31*(4). 363-382

Vallerand, R. J., Pelletier, L. G., Blais, M. R., Briere, N. M., Senecal, C., Vallieres, E. F. (1992). The Academic Motivation Scale: A measure of Intrinsic, Extrinsic and Amotivation in Education. *Educational and Psychological Measurement, 52*(4). 1003 – 1017. https:doi.or/10.1177/0013164492052004025

Questions