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“Catch them before they fall”

Frances Chapman and Sue Sherwin

Introduction

The authors have worked with first-year students collectively for 22 years on the BSc (Hons) Nursing; for the last five years they have implemented a range of initiatives aimed at supporting Year 1 undergraduates to improve the first-year experience and reduce attrition. The driver for these initiatives was the change in the profile of applicants in response to Government strategies to widen participation in higher education (Department for Education and Skills, 2003; The Disability Discrimination Act, 1995). This has led to an increased diversity within the student population with a significant proportion of students from ‘non-typical’ backgrounds (Macdonald and Stratta, 2001); for example, students from families where members have historically not entered higher education.

It was noted that while widening participation resulted in a more representative cross-section of society joining the first year of the nursing course, which led to a rich mix of experiences supportive to the curriculum, students were also arriving with a variety of experiences of education. Specifically, the academic quality of the first essay submitted by the students did not conform to usual academic standards and there was an increase in the number of essays failing to meet the criteria for a pass. Failing the first assignment can be demoralising for students and may lead to a loss in confidence in their academic ability which will be exacerbated if feedback is not handled sensitively and constructively (Brookhart, 2008). The feedback given to students contained detailed information about academic writing in higher education. During discussions students said that they felt they lacked preparation for this type of writing, particularly in relation to referencing and avoiding plagiarism. In response to this expressed need, the nursing academic team developed, implemented and evaluated two interventions which comprised two key elements: a distance learning pack and the implementation of a personal tutor system.

The interventions

All students who accepted a place on the nursing course were sent a distance learning pack in advance of their arrival that consisted of the following:

- a self-evaluation learning booklet on essay writing, grammar and punctuation, study skills and the Harvard system of referencing
- two published articles from nursing journals, one of which was more academically challenging than the other, about nursing students’ experiences of practice placements
- details of an assessment which consisted of a formative essay (500 words) to compare and contrast the two published articles in the pack
- an information booklet that provided guidance on all of the above, contact details for the course administrator so that students could seek support, and submission details.

Students were given the first week of the course to complete this distance learning pack. On the first day of the second week students were enrolled at Leeds Met and during this process submitted their distance learning packs. These were distributed to each student’s personal tutor for marking.

A personal tutor system was implemented to focus exclusively on the personal and professional development of students. Academic staff were given eight hours per student for each student they were allocated as personal tutor, up to a maximum of six students per academic. Guidance booklets were provided for both staff and students outlining the purpose of the personal tutors, expectations of both students and staff, the frequency of meetings and how these should be arranged, and support systems available for students within Leeds Met and externally.

Students met their personal tutors on their first day at the University and worked in small groups that focused on ‘ice breakers’ and on completing an enjoyable task. During the following six weeks a further meeting was arranged for each student to meet his or her personal tutor individually to receive feedback on the distance learning pack.

Additional meetings were offered within each semester of the first year; such meetings relied on the students seeking a meeting with their personal tutors.

There were two elements to the first meeting: one was to provide feedback to students on their distance learning pack; the other was to provide pastoral support. In feedback on their essays students were allocated a mark commensurate with Level 1, using a marking template consistent with higher education. They were also given verbal feedback on their essays and on the completion of the learning pack generally. All students who failed to achieve a minimum mark of 40% were advised to undertake an online assessment of learning needs called QuickScan

(<http://www.sgul.ac.uk/students/students-with-disabilities/no-name.cfm>) that is available on all the Leeds Met library computers. Quickscan is an online package that assesses learning needs and will advise a student to seek further help or assessment as necessary; learning support needs are also identified. Students were also advised on referencing skills, where to find guidance on Harvard referencing, and how to access an online Leeds Met study skills package.

Pastoral support typically focused on homesickness, settling into accommodation, finance, expectations of the course, and relationships with peers. Personal tutors guided students to appropriate support both internal and external to Leeds Met.

Evaluation

Evaluation of the interventions was carried out through staff group discussion, feedback from the student course representatives, and feedback from individual students through dialogue with their personal tutors. A number of issues were raised in relation to both the distance learning resources and the personal tutor system, which included:

- the complexity of one of the published articles, which was considered to be incompatible with Level 1 work

- the lack of resources to inform students about how to avoid plagiarism
- the consequences of receiving a poor mark for the first formative assessment had a negative impact on students
- a number of consistent themes arising out of personal tutor feedback, for example language, flow, use of first person, bullet pointing, use of evidence
- inaccessibility of online resources owing to students not being enrolled until the second week of the course
- students not taking up the opportunity for subsequent meetings with personal tutors even though these would be beneficial for some
- students stating that they would value having a personal tutor throughout the course
- some students reported that they would have preferred a personal tutor from within the nursing group rather than somebody from other professional groups.

Discussion

In response to the evaluation of the interventions, changes were made to the distance learning pack and the personal tutor system to align more with Leeds Met's Assessment, Learning and Teaching objectives (2005-2008). The distance learning pack retains the self-evaluation materials; the two articles have been replaced with information regarding plagiarism and how to avoid it (Stinson, 2003), and the 500-word essay now requires students to write about plagiarism and to reference this correctly. In addition the pack now contains detailed information on making the most of student feedback (Race, 2007). Included in this is a structured feedback form developed from the themes that arose from the personal tutor feedback, which is designed to help students avoid common errors and directs the personal tutor to feedback commensurate with Level 1 writing.

Students are now enrolled prior to receiving the distance learning packs so that they can access further materials online to support their work on the first formative essay. This essay is no longer

allocated a mark; instead personal tutors feedback the strengths of the work to students and discuss their learning needs to develop their potential. Any student who may benefit from additional support is encouraged to complete QuickScan, possibly followed up with a more formal assessment to identify specific needs.

All students are allocated a personal tutor from the nursing group and a more structured approach is taken to meetings which are now timetabled within each semester. Careful consideration was given to this approach and it was acknowledged that providing personal tutor support across three years may potentially exceed staffing resources. To accommodate this within existing resources, the personal tutor role has been merged with an existing 'practice support tutor' role; practice support tutors meet weekly with students.

In spite of the focus on plagiarism and referencing for this first essay, some Year 1 students still find these academic skills a challenge (Macdonald & Carroll, 2006). To try and address this need the authors have introduced further learning support in the form of timetabled sessions early in Year 1 that are designed to be both informative and fun. Students are given information in a variety of formats; they self-assess their learning during the session through the use of entertaining activities, and incentives to participate are given throughout the session (Race and Pickford, 2007).

Although this approach has not as yet had a statistically significant impact on attrition rates, exit interviews indicate that students are satisfied with the levels of support they are provided with and sometimes commend the course on this despite their decision to leave. The authors continue to evaluate this work through discussion with colleagues and students, and more objective measures are being developed via attrition rates, student marks, and the early identification of student learning needs and thus the implementation of timely support such as proof-readers and support for English as a written language.

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“ 46 years old and sitting my first exam in 25 years! How had I got myself into this situation? When I applied for this degree course I'd not considered that I might find myself in a situation more scary than childbirth! Modern education was all about course work and portfolio development, wasn't it? I could manage that. This method of assessment had been introduced specifically for people like me, hadn't it? People who struggle to perform in exam conditions due to nerves. The fear factor as I entered the room stimulated an adrenalin rush. My heart rate tripled, my bladder became over-active and my mind went blank. I wanted to run away.

Paper handed out, clock ticking ominously in the background, I recalled the familiar feelings of terror from my school days. Now I was faced with a choice: flee the room or pull myself together! Time for a mental pep talk and deep breaths. This is just another challenge as I develop professionally on the journey to become a Specialist Community Public Health Nurse, Occupational Health. I can do it.

The sense of achievement as I complete the exam paper is immense. I'd overcome fear and met the challenge! ”

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