



Developing tailored study plans for the new higher education environment: 'Letting go of control'

Flinders University

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At its core, this fellowship was focused on addressing student engagement in the tertiary sector. This may be the most important issue facing universities today. The lack of engagement is having a significant impact on student retention and student success. Given the huge resources used to attract students in the first place, it is critical that universities explore all options available to meaningfully engage with their students to give them every chance of success. The work in this fellowship explored an approach for program design known as interdisciplinary studies, which is used extensively in the United States, and also pioneered a new approach to the delivery of a first-year science topic.

Interdisciplinary studies

The work in this part of the fellowship explored this different approach to defining a program of study. In brief, with support, students define their own program of study with very few limitations other than ensuring topic prerequisites are met and the final number of credits is obtained. This program allows students to mix and match subject areas in line with their interests and future career ambitions.

The programs represent a powerful approach to working with students that Australian universities should be exploring. The positives of the implementation of such an approach include:

- (1) Student retention—interestingly, most often it was struggling students who successfully used these programs to complete their studies.
- (2) Institutional financial gains—retention of a student who would otherwise be lost represents significant extra income.
- (3) Market testing—the program does allow the testing in the marketplace of new degree programs, which can be mainstreamed if of interest to other students. This ability to take the guesswork out of the launching of new degree programs would save considerable resources for institutions.

Modern Chemistry was launched at Flinders University in semester 2, 2016, and now three cohorts of students have undertaken the topic. At its core, the topic allows students to select a pathway along which they will be able to learn particular concepts and skills. There are no lectures, so students are expected to learn concepts from various sources (and can get help at any time). All assessment is done through oral conversations and can be repeated multiple times until the right level of understanding is demonstrated. There is also significant group work and students must plan their own schedule. These are all skills critical for future success.

Work is currently underway to analyse student attitude and response to the topic, and the progress of the students will be monitored over the coming years. Already, some clear messages are emerging:

- (1) Without the bounds of a curriculum many students acquired a much deeper understanding of the topics covered.
- (2) The success rate in the topic went from about 50% to about 80%.
- (3) Students have concerns at the start of the topic, as it is something new, but most grow to enjoy the freedom and environment of interaction with other students and staff.
- (4) Students are now enrolling in the topic due to word of mouth about the enjoyment of the topic. The topic is likely more work than the standard topic, yet students are still signing up.

The full impact of this approach will only be learned in future years.

Finally, it was very clear that the two approaches explored in this work are resource intensive. However, the extra student retention easily justifies this extra resourcing.

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