Intensive Student Support Coordination

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Abstract

This pilot project funded by the Student Services and Amenities Fee tested an approach for coordinated support to students with complex, multiple social, health, academic and behavioural needs. Strategies have been designed for effective student participation and access to appropriate services. It was concluded that when working in partnership with students, wraparound support from academic and professional staff increases positive student experiences and outcomes.

Keywords

Wraparound student support, complex student needs, reasonable adjustments

Background

The University of Melbourne's Student Equity and Disability Services (SEDS) team provides services to students disadvantaged academically by disability or ill health. The team responds to applications for reasonable adjustments that enable equitable academic participation and facilitates special consideration applications due to unexpected circumstances. Reasonable adjustments meet the University's obligation[1] to provide an equitable learning environment through provision of adjustments such as software, captioning or notetaking[2]. Special consideration sits within University policy and requires students to evidence unexpected impact that prevents their timely submission of assignments or sitting an exam on the day it was scheduled. Situating both functions within the same team provides opportunities for referrals for students who apply for special consideration multiple times or request one-off assistance. There are, however, students with complex and diverse needs that impact on their capacity to meet university requirements despite the availability of academic adjustments. There is a gap in service provision for some students who have multiple, complex needs that require coordination across services and processes. In 2019 a coordinated intensive support service delivered across services and processes to enhance outcomes for these students was piloted.

There is an assumption at the institutional level that students can fully engage and take responsibility for themselves and their enrolment (Fossey, Chaffey, Venville, Ennals, Douglas, & Bigby, 2017). Some students have trouble navigating university systems and bureaucratic requirements (Bengsten, 2018), balancing financial and personal pressures with academic, and the stigma associated with disclosing disability or other conditions (Bostwick, 2014; McMullen, 2000). There is an expectation that students can and will self-advocate and have insight into the impact of their lived experience on their continued engagement with education beyond their immediate crisis. This expectation of student self-advocacy sits alongside the fact that, under legislation, disability services cannot be provided until the student makes a request (Fink, 2016). Those students who need assistance and who are unable to access the support needed because of unnecessarily complicated university administrative systems and procedures, inaccessible processes or under-resourced services, may find their condition exacerbated by an overlay of stress and/or anxiety, which may place them at increased academic risk (Bostwick, 2014). Despite provision of academic adjustments, systemic failings may mean the student will need to negotiate and then renegotiate the requested adjustments (Fossey et al., 2017; Skinner, 2007). There are hidden costs when students don't receive intensive support as required. These include a necessity to appeal to academic progress committees, request special consideration reviews, engage in academic board appeals, and apply for fee remittance when failing or withdrawing

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[1] Disability Standards for Education 2005
[2] Resources for reasonable adjustments in Australian tertiary education are available through the Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training (ADCET).

from subjects. All of which may be due to multiple barriers to students academic persistence and success.

Delivering student-centred services when the administration is complex and fragmented leaves staff feeling that they spend more time than is desirable in translating policy and process to students, resulting in reduced time to address practice issues and focus on the student's presenting needs (Bengsten, 2018; Fossey et al., 2017). Few students are aware of the adjustments that would best support them and the legislation underpinning these adjustments. Self-advocacy skills to describe the impact of disability and facilitate adjustments to address it may not have been provided in school and need further development in the tertiary environment given students' capacities (Summers, White, Zhang and Gordon, 2014). The university has an obligation to provide adjustments in a timely manner (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2005), yet to start this process students must document need and make a request (Fossey et al., 2017; Hadley, 2011; Summers et al., 2014). Timing is of critical importance, not only from a legal perspective. Timely interventions can result in less intensive support required in the long-term improving student experiences and academic outcomes (Bostwick, 2014).

Based on identified student need within SEDS, a decision was made to increase the capability and capacity of academic and student support services, including SEDS, to identify and address the complex needs of this small but time-intensive cohort of students who do not progress in their academic studies. A developmental approach recognises the need for assistance and strategies to enhance independent academic engagement (Hadley, 2011). Such a developmental approach aligns with the view of the University's Student Life Strategy, that students "should be partners in creation of the student experience, involved in decision making, taking responsibility for actions, and assisting with delivery" (University of Melbourne, 2019, p.8). Figure 1 outlines the service model which aligns developmental approach with student need and demonstrates where intensive support worked within the model during the pilot.
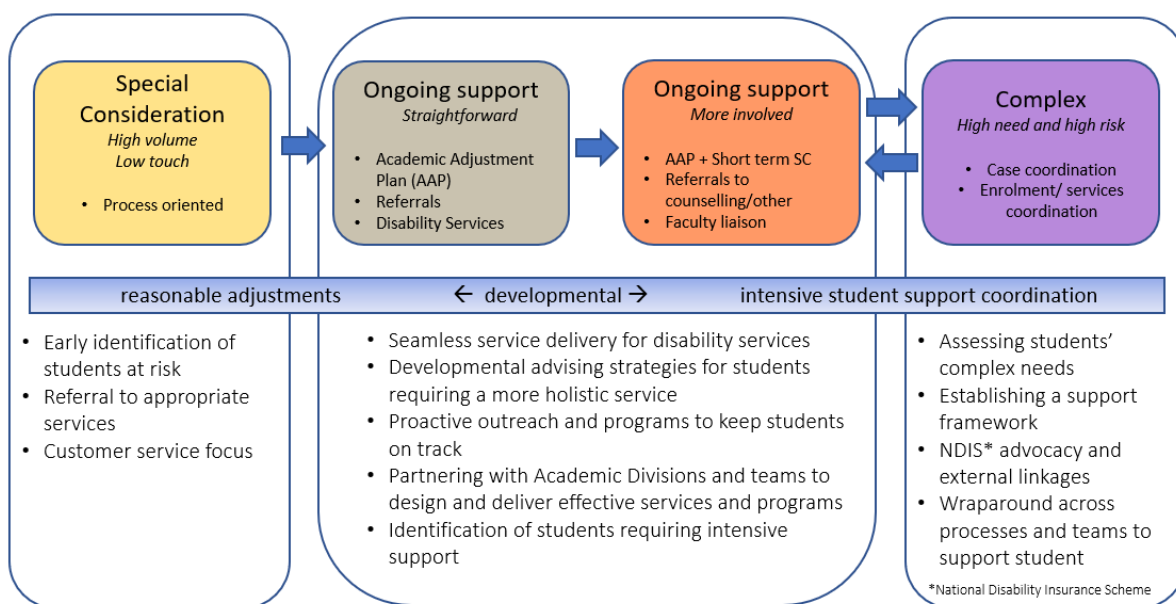

Figure 1: SEDS service model

Identifying desired outcomes

In the short term, the gaps in service delivery between academic and student services were explored and understood. Training designed to build capacity within the SEDS team was deployed to equip staff to increase the effectiveness of the support services provided. Learnings from the intensive

support identified improvements to facilitation of reasonable adjustments and ensured delivery of timely, appropriate services for equity registered students. The goal being to reduce students' future need for coordinated intensive support (McMullen, 2000; Hsaio et al, 2018).

A medium-term key outcome was the development of effective ways to identify and offer support to the students. Original referrals came from Academic Board appeals and from faculty staff concerned about student wellbeing and student failure rates. SEDS staff also referred those students who were returning to study after negative academic experiences and those that had complaints about reasonable adjustments that failed to meet their needs.

The longer-term outcomes identified were threefold: to increase student engagement, retention and success reflected through academic progress, informed and empowered decision-making and student self-advocacy (Fossey et al., 2017). Analysis of student outcomes via improved academic results over three semesters of study, and reduced failure rates will be used to measure long-term outcomes. Measures as indicated by students through collaboratively establishing criteria will include self-reported increased confidence in self-advocacy (Fossey et al., 2017; Hadley, 2011; Summer et al., 2014).

Delivering a framework for support coordination

In 2019 two social workers were recruited to develop a framework for support coordination and to test the framework's effectiveness. They initially liaised with other educational institutions to benchmark student support strategies, and consulted with student services, the student union and faculty colleagues to understand the stakeholder issues.

A skill and confidence audit was developed and shared with SEDS staff. Training was developed to build confidence and capability in working with the student cohort. Training sessions provided during 2019 focussed on strategies to support students with complex needs. Students were invited to work with the intensive support coordinators through referrals from within SEDS and from academic divisions. This two-pronged approach follows Bostwick's (2014) recommendation for proactive models of service provision and promotion of help seeking behaviour accompanied by strategies that address deficiencies in bureaucratic systems and staff skill. The training materials and staff pre- and post-training surveys became a resource for ongoing capacity building and for evaluation processes.

Alongside staff training and supportive practice meetings, the framework includes short term and ongoing intensive support. Some students benefitted from regular meetings with teaching staff, external providers, and other student services. Academic staff contacted support coordinators to seek advice on strategies for effective communication and student engagement, this indirect support assisted the student and built staff capacity. Other students worked closely with the support coordinator to identify their goals, explore stigma and self-stigmatisation and the role each played in their academic progress. A considered, person-centred, cross-team approach became possible given the specialist skills within SEDS, ensuring time and expertise to facilitate, and an active collegiate approach evidenced both across and within the student support teams.

During 2020, in order to reach students before they encountered difficulties, active outreach was undertaken to equity registered students. This outreach aimed to ascertain whether adjustments were working in the pandemic virtual campus, and to identify those students who might benefit from intensive support coordination. Students prioritised for this outreach included 42 students with multiple disabilities and mental health concerns. Only two of these students had already established regular in-person support through SEDS. The students were approached with an initial email emphasising student choice and offering services. The emailed invitation provided opportunity for students to prepare for the call and state their preferred time to talk. Only one student declined the invitation. A telephone call to the remaining 39 students followed and included service referral and risk assessment. Six students had a second telephone call and four were referred for ongoing support.

Resources developed have been retained for future iterations of outreach to students. This approach was shared with other services who were also calling students and experiencing a low response rate.

Not all students with complex needs are comfortable disclosing their situation (Summers et al., 2014). It was hypothesised that there may be other students not registered with SEDS who would also benefit. Early intervention initiatives within student services (University of Melbourne, 2019) are encouraged to refer students as appropriate for coordinated intensive support.

Pilot outcomes

Benefit of timely interventions

As identified earlier (Bostwick, 2014) early intervention can result in less intensive support delivered over a shorter period. The preventative benefits of early intervention were demonstrated by the effectiveness of the outreach to students before mid-semester. This was a key finding of the telephone outreach initiative. The students' circumstances at the beginning of semester may not have necessitated intervention however as mid-semester approached changed circumstances were coming to the fore and students were able to mitigate these through short-term intensive support. Those students referred by Academic Board and by faculty experienced outcomes that included continued enrolment, reduced behavioural concerns, and constructive interactions with teaching staff. These preliminary outcomes showed that even when referred late in their enrolment, intensive support can have a positive impact.

Benefit of a collaborative approach

Hsiao et al (2018) found that a collaborative approach to adjustments contributed to student self-advocacy and persistence and this outcome was mirrored in the findings of this pilot program. Qualitative data were given via survey by students and staff who were involved in the pilot. One student stated that coordinated support assisted with *"the tasks I struggled with due to disability, and by listening to my issues and helping me solve problems that came up along the way".* Another reported coordinated support

> *really helped me overcome some of the self-worth issues that I have. The assistance I received has had an impact that I think will be long lasting. I feel as though I will be able to continue to work toward my goals even after the end of the support. I am really grateful for the opportunity to take part.*

Success mechanisms include communication for effective information and expertise sharing between all involved, developing students' self-advocacy and confidence and addressing teaching staff reticence to provide adjustments through increased awareness of the impacts of disability (Hsiao et al., 2018; Skinner, 2007). Capacity development within SEDS was measured by confidence ratings which improved after training and practice sessions. Staff reflected *"while not entirely new to these techniques, I do feel it builds on confidence"*, *"good content and relevant to the team"*, *"this is just what we needed"*, and *"using it every day".*

Concerns were raised about whether the intensive support will be sustainable given the number of enrolled students who may require the coordinated intensive support. Some students benefit most when afforded weekly meetings throughout their enrolment and intermittent facilitated meetings with teaching staff and external service providers. Others thrive independently after a short time of intensive support that may include twice weekly meetings. The funding proposal anticipated impact on 80-100 students through staff training and direct student contact. This was met during the 15 months of the pilot, with the majority of the indirect impact facilitated through support provided to staff in SEDS and faculties. While the intensive nature of the work requires time to build trust and

engage with students, the teaching period and student lifecycle progresses while this trust is being established. Intensive support coordination allows students to progress with the semester demands rather than being left behind. It is anticipated that the volume of student need for coordinated intensive support will be effectively mitigated by the use of dedicated resources, the structure provided by the natural student lifecycle and the continued skill development of the staff who regularly support students with academic adjustments.

A survey of 19 senior academic staff, college staff, student advocacy and faculty staff showed that 90% of respondents engaged with students on an individual basis and had also supported a student with complex needs within the past 12 months. Of the staff surveyed, 55% had consulted with a student support coordinator in order to support the student and reported in survey responses that *"experience working with colleagues from SEDS has been exceptional and instructive"*. Intensive support was *"very useful in a complex situation ...where we referred the student to SEDS to assist in coordination across faculties to provide better support to the student and seek to achieve consistency wherever possible"*. Staff reported that the coordinated support was *"positive, supportive to student and to the staff"*, and that the SEDS staff *"come with good plans and strategies to discuss"*. If the service continues, long-term outcomes will be measured by academic progress and further qualitative inquiry. The valuable perspectives of students, pastoral care staff, college accommodation staff, teaching staff and internal and external service providers can inform the specialist staff who are able to bridge the gaps created by institutional structural silos and provide wraparound support to the students (Bengsten, 2018; Fink, 2016; Hadley, 2011).

Future direction

Moving beyond the pilot program we are now exploring ways to embed intensive student support coordination within the Student Equity and Disability Service model. Outreach to vulnerable students has become an integral part of the team approach, rather than waiting for requests for assistance. The invitational email is used both as a referral point into intensive support coordination (if required), and to ensure that adjustments and services are providing the intended equitable learning experiences. Coordinated support addresses student need to develop self-advocacy skills and supports staff development in recognising this need and acting on it (Bostwick, 2014; Fossey et al., 2017). The pilot showed that specialist roles with experience of strengths-based person-centred approach alongside extensive knowledge of the tertiary context and student life cycle yielded impressive results for students and the staff who work to support them.

Planned evaluation will include a longitudinal review of academic results of students who engaged in the intensive support coordination. Qualitative feedback will need to be collected alongside quantitative feedback from academic staff and professional staff working with students, for full insight into the impacts of the service. Students will be asked via telephone interview more about what they attribute their success to, explore the causal links and efficacy of services, and identify opportunities for improvement. Regular, informal feedback from stakeholders throughout can prove valuable in determining opportunities for service improvement because it gives suggestions for personalised approach during the active student lifecycle (McMullen, 2000).

Cost benefit analysis will assist in determining the hidden costs to the university of not providing intensive support when needed. Analysis of risk factors and early identification of potential candidates for intensive support coordination will measure the effectiveness of the engagement and outreach to students. During the evaluation there will an attempt to identify and stratify student need, and then to evaluate the effectiveness of using these risk tools to both identify and stratify need.

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