

DO ENTRY LEVELS AND TEACHING PEDAGOGY RELATE TO STUDENT OUTCOMES

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This paper will report on the outcomes for international students from two different cohorts, undertaking equivalent courses. The two streams are differentiated by their course entry standards. The entry level for one stream is an academic ENTER score of 68 and an IELTS language score of 5.5 and for the other an academic ENTER score of 80 with an IELTS language score of 6.0 was needed. Each of these two cohorts' is taught in a different manner. The two cohorts of students have been tracked over a period of years and their educational outcomes compared. The tracking indicates that the student cohort with the lower entry level has achieved similar outcomes to that with the higher entry level. Can it be concluded that the similarity in outcomes can be attributed to teaching methodology?

INTRODUCTION

Swinburne University of Technology (SU) offered a Foundation year of study for many years, for students preparing to undertake a variety of business courses at SU and other universities in Melbourne. The Foundation year was seen as the equivalent to year 12 of Secondary/high School. In 1998 the Uni_link program was introduced to sit on top of the Foundation year.

Students could enter the Uni_link program from the Foundation year or via other year 12 programs or equivalent from all over the world. This currently requires them to have a minimum academic ENTER score of 68 and a minimum IELTS language score of 5.5. The Uni_link program is equivalent or more correctly the same as the first year of the business degree. This first year is undertaken in a slightly different way to the Traditional, Lecture/Tutorial mode as with most undergraduate courses. The delivery mode is via the more teacher centered learning, where students are placed in classes of twenty. In this setting all aspects of the individual subject matter are covered and student centered activity is undertaken.

It is this difference in delivery of the subject material in the first year of the business degree, where students are allocated placements based on their entry levels, and their course outcomes that is to be examined. The Uni_link program like the Foundation year is currently offered only to international (overseas) students, with classes conducted within the TAFE (Technical and Further Education) Division of SU.

HISTORY

Uni_link came about as result of discussions between the Higher Education (Traditional University) divisions and the TAFE division within SU. The aim in broad terms was to maintain a presence in the same market place but to also offer (to suitably qualified students) similar programs to those offered by other institutions.

In the past students had entered the second year of the business degree after doing very well (academically) whilst completing the two year business diploma at the TAFE. This consisted of four semesters of seventeen weeks over the two years. The students who usually undertook the diploma usually had not met the minimum Year 12 entry requirements for the degree.

The weekly student contact hours for Uni_link students were increased over the diploma students by about 25% for their two (17 week) semesters. A minimum entry requirement was set for Uni_link, which was lower than the degree and the diploma option is still available, along with the foundation year.

DIFFERENT LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

The traditional method of delivery with most undergraduate degrees is via the lecture tutorial system where the students undertake two one hour lectures and also have a one hour tutorial/lab/prac. The lectures are for the exchange of subject matter and concepts, with several

hundred students, whilst the tutorial/lab/prac, with 20 to 40 students, is to develop an understanding of the subject material through problem solving, practical application or research. In this situation the student manages his or her own learning. It is up to the student to digest the subject material, depending on the presentation in the lecture and the motivation of the student, then a satisfactory understanding of the subject matter can be attained in the eyes of both the educator and learner.

The method of delivery for the Uni_link program is similar to that of the high school where the delivery of the subject material is teacher centered, interspersed, with problem solving, practical or research as directed, the student is still responsible for managing his or her own learning. These classes have, as previously stated, usually a maximum of twenty students in them. Through this the students digest the subject material and hopefully are motivated, whereby a satisfactory understanding of the subject matter can be attained in the eyes of both the educator and learner.

In both the first year of the degree and the Uni_link course the students undertake equivalent curriculum with the learning outcomes mirrored. In both programs the majority of the assessment is common, with common exams and equivalent assignments and agreement on other assessment. This is different to the students who undertake the, two year, diploma (in some cases an advanced diploma). The diploma is delivered by the same mode as that of Uni_link. However with the diploma course, which is currently based on a national set of curriculum and learning outcomes, the assessment is undertaken with virtually no input from those who manage the degree.

COMPARISON OF RESULTS

In the ideal study the two cohorts undertaking the first year of the degree via the two programs, degree and Uni_link, should be compared. These cohorts should be international (overseas) students in the degree and the Uni_link students. In this case the results on a subject-by-subject comparison for the second and third year of the degree could be carried out. This should then be followed by a completion time comparison of the two cohorts. Unfortunately this ideal study has not taken place at this stage and a further comparison should include the diploma students who articulate to the degree.

WHAT DO WE NOW KNOW

An inspection of the outcomes of Uni_link students who have completed or will complete the degree is possible. This will give an indication of how these students progress through to the end of their degree. The Uni_link Program, which has had two intakes each year (February and July), has been in operation since 1998. The result of this is that four intakes have had the opportunity to complete within the minimum standard time frame of four semesters.

Of the students who undertook the Uni_link program in 1998 and 1999, 84% were successful with that program. Of those who were successful in Uni_link, 81% commenced the final two years to attain the degree at SU. The completion rate of students within the minimum standard time frame is currently 57% and a further 24% have or expect to complete the degree within the minimum standard time frame plus one semester. All up it is expected that 93% of students from these intakes will complete the degree within the minimum standard time plus two semesters, with a number of these students progressing on to undertake masters studies. The completion results of these students who undertook the degree, via the Uni_link entry, are comparable to students who have undertaken this and other similar degrees.

FINDINGS

Whilst there can not be any conclusion reached on how Uni_link students progress in relation to other forms of degree commencement at this stage there are certain inferences that can be drawn. These being that:-

- The Uni_link program produces students capable of completing the degree within the standard timeframe.
- Students who enter the degree via the Uni_link program can and do access further qualifications.

- Students with lower entry levels can achieve just as well as students with higher entry levels with different teaching methodologies.
- Transition by high school graduates to the traditional form of University teaching may require further investigation.

DISCUSSION

Teaching methodology to students commencing at different entry levels has been looked at in broad terms. The indications are that students may benefit from a more structured learning environment initially if they have lower academic entry scores. We must however not lose sight of what other education is taking place, other than that of the subject matter of the curricula. The way in which students learn is a complicated concept and will not be expanded in this context except that, different students are potentially capable of achieving the same outcomes if they have motivation. Can a student's learning be enhanced by the way the subject matter is presented to them?

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