

Partnerships for success: A collaborative support model to enhance the first year student experience¹

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Abstract

Recent discourse about engaging first year students calls for more collaboration in terms of adopting a holistic approach to course delivery and support. This paper discusses a collaborative support model operating at a regional Australian university since 2008. In particular, it describes a collaborative support initiative emerging from this model that is based on providing an informal consultative space where students can drop-in and gain assessment support for research, writing and content. A focus group, online surveys and interviews with co-ordinators were conducted to evaluate the impact of this initiative. Findings suggest that this collaborative support model impacts on the first year student experience by: raising awareness about academic skills and the processes for researching and writing; promoting peer learning opportunities; building confidence and providing suitable support for a diverse range of students.

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Introduction

The widening of participation in higher education and the focus on retention has facilitated debate about the best way to provide support to commencing students. Key recommendations of the Bradley review (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008) are that by 2020, Australian universities should increase the proportion of students from a low socio-economic status background to 20% and also increase the number of 25 to 34-year-olds having attained a qualification at bachelor level to 40%. These targets bring with them added challenges for universities with increasingly diverse cohorts of students likely to need extra support during their transition into higher education and throughout their degree. As most students do not arrive at university as independent learners, it is important that support systems are in place to assist and scaffold students in skill development and that they are guided to take a deeper approach to their learning (Kift, Nelson, & Clarke 2010; Tinto, 2006-2007). With an aim to bring together institutional guidance and instruction to support and engage students, a collaborative approach to support provision was established at the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC) in Queensland, Australia in 2008. This paper explores the benefits that have emerged from this support model, focusing on the established collaborative drop-in service for business subjects, BUdi (Business drop-in). This service brings together assessment support for research, writing and content into one informal location that students can voluntarily access on a weekly basis to gain one-on-one feedback and guidance on assessment tasks.

Rationale

The notion of providing a collaborative support service was initiated by the desire to create institutional interactions that would facilitate first year student awareness of and access to timely support. To enhance first year student transition and experience, the responsibility of providing support is not an individual faculty or department concern, rather whole of institution players need to move beyond the separateness of academic, administrative and support services and create cross faculty and cross department interactions (Kift et al., 2010; McInnis, 2003). Further, literature states that to improve student engagement and success, course delivery must become a component of an institutional action model which brings together faculty, academic, administrative and support programs to invest in a variety of collaborative support services outside the classroom (Burnett & Larmar, 2011; Kift, 2009; Kift & Nelson, 2005; Kift et al., 2010; Tinto, 2006-2007; Tinto & Pusser, 2006). It would follow that a collaborative whole of institution approach to support can benefit the first year experience.

In higher education, different approaches to the role of support skills and collaboration with faculty can be found. These partnerships often involve tensions and can change in nature and role due to external and internal factors (Hicks, 2005). Early work by Jones, Bonanno, and Scouller (2001) asserts that reflection on the role and the partnerships created through collaboration between faculty teacher, student and skills teacher is integral to the understanding of best practice. The initiative of providing collaborative support has been founded on an intersection of aims in the provision of

information literacy (research) and academic literacy (academic skill support). Both academic literacy and information literacy have a specific discourse and are guided by teaching and learning strategies developed over time in evidence-based practice. Each exists within a distinct professional field, which is bound by specific qualifications and expertise in that discourse (Peacock, 2008). Even though the discourses for both these skills notionally overlap, a curious disconnection between librarians and skills advisors has been evident. These support areas often sit outside the academy and are disassociated from each other in terms of content, development, delivery and student engagement (Elmborg, 2003; Peacock, 2008). Fister (1995) refers to this as an invisible intellectual wall between those who teach students to write and those who teach students to research. It was through reflection on the effectiveness of services and the role played by the librarian and skills advisor at USC in 2008 which led to the visualising of an improved model of collaboration with the faculty.

The collaborative support model

Whole of institution and first year transition programs and models are evident in other Australian universities. These programs include whole of institutional approaches such as: peer mentoring and webpage interaction for students to manage their academic, administrative and support services (Kift et al. 2010; Queensland University of Technology [QUT], 2002). Further, the impact of grouping first year students into "Pods", where there is collaboration between teaching and faculty, administration and support staff, has been noted as an effective transitioning strategy (Masters & Donnison, 2010). Kokkinn and

Maher (2011) have reviewed emerging literature over the last decade looking at three-way collaborative support models in Australia. Other than the first year advisor led service of "common time" (Burnett & Larmar, 2011), and the work by Spurrier and Stevenson (2001) and Kokkinn and Maher, little else has been reported on three-way collaboration between course coordinators, academic skills advisors and librarians. In particular, literature reporting on the specific practice of bringing these areas together in a shared consultative drop-in space is to date scant. This paper aims to address this gap.

USC has a diverse student base, with many students from areas with low socio-economic profiles, and 52% of students either first-in-family at university or returning to study after a break from education. In addition, USC currently plays a crucial role in broadening regional participation in tertiary education. Meetings between the faculty teacher, the skills advisor and librarian, dating back to 2008, enabled the development of the collaborative support model, which is driven by a common desire to find better ways to support our diverse student group. As visually demonstrated in Figure 1, the model represents the collaborative and instructional role and relationship between the skills advisor, the librarian and the faculty teacher. The block arrows represent the on-going communication that each participant has with the other. Areas highlighted, of particular interest, are the initiatives that involve a clear overlapping of all three participant groups. Students are central in this model, as the support is designed around student needs. The collaboration between faculty and support departments, in a central drop-in location, provides students with easier access to a wide range of support services

at one time, raising awareness of services and “just in time” support in a student-centric environment designed to promote better transition and success.

information literacy, academic skills and content advice; and

- fostering better collegial relationships between skill support and faculty to encourage collaborative planning.

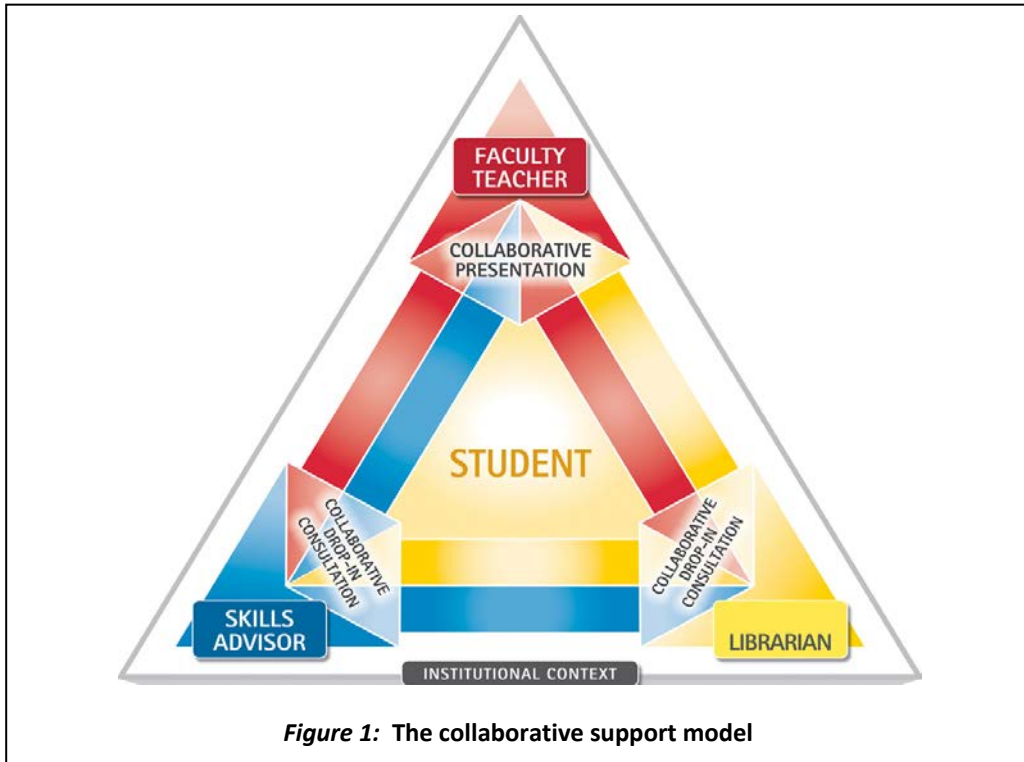


Figure 1: The collaborative support model

The intended benefits of this collaborative support model include:

- promoting a holistic approach by providing less add-on skill sessions and more collaborative team-teaching sessions integrated into course delivery;
- raising student awareness about their individual research and writing skill levels and understanding that these skills are interconnected in a process;
- providing support opportunities to students by integrating access to

Background

This paper builds on a previous study that explored the early adaptation of the collaborative model. In 2009, the impact of providing integrated team-taught skills presentations into first year foundation business courses was evaluated (Einfalt & Turley, 2009a). This 2009 study was prompted by the common observation that many students did not grasp the crucial interdependent relationship between the skill of researching and the skill of writing. After discussions with key faculty teachers, integrated skills presentations were

customised to specific assessment tasks and co-taught in the lectures of first year business courses. Students were surveyed before and after the team-taught skills presentation to gauge their individual perceptions about their research and writing skills in response to the skills presentation. Survey results (n= 651) showed that student awareness about the process required to write the set task were improved and that the presentations made students feel more confident to start (Einfalt & Turley, 2009a). However, follow-up interviews with course co-ordinators about the intervention raised interest in extending the noted benefits from this partnership in a collaborative drop-in service provided for assessment support, BUdi. Faculty academics have been encouraged to promote the BUdi service as part of course delivery and as a place where students can bring their developing assessment tasks for skill guidance from the librarian and skills advisor and a number of academics who offer content support. This intervention has paved the way forward by putting the collaborative model into action (Einfalt & Turley, 2009b). It has also promoted further investigation into the benefits of this alternative platform for providing collaborative support. The findings to date are presented in this paper.

The study

BUdi is a voluntary, informal drop-in service available to students for a two hour period, once a week. BUdi is promoted by faculty teachers in lectures and during the embedded team-taught skills presentations delivered by the librarian and academic skills advisor. As a result, students are able to see a “face” and identify the research or writing support that they can later access at the BUdi service. The space used for

BUdi utilises a long central board table where students can be directed to different experts and advisors sitting at different places, as identified by signage. Generally, students arrive at BUdi with a clear intention, for example, to look over a draft or to make sure they are on the right track. The faculty teacher may engage a group of students in joint discussion during the planning stage of the assessment task. However, as work progresses, students are more likely to seek out skills support and research support in addition to content clarification. Students are encouraged to sit in groups to discuss their assessment task with each other or compare drafts and are often at different stages of completion. Students often bring laptops and continue draft development whilst at BUdi so they can gain instant advice when they find a need for some clarification. Students often arrive at BUdi in search of the faculty teacher but will then be directed to seek additional skill support on their assessment from the skills advisor or librarian. Having a “greeter” (usually an administrative staff member or a student mentor) to direct arriving students is helpful. This role enables new and unsure students to be ushered to sit near a group in the same subject area and allows the student to be guided to the best expert. As students return to BUdi, for additional visits, they appear more comfortable about sitting with others and working on their assessment task whilst waiting to see an expert. It is noted that these students are more likely to engage in peer-to-peer interaction without facilitation by a staff member. Peak attendance is generally recorded in the weeks when foundation course first year assignments are due. However, from mid-semester, students will return to gain support and advice on more than one assessment task. The design and collaborative approach encapsulated by

the BUdi service enables students to compare and contrast their work with other students, gain and give guidance to peers, see assessment samples, ask questions about different tasks and be referred on to alternative support when required.

From a total of 26 student attendees in 2008, BUdi attendance has grown rapidly and 2011 experienced a record growth to 614 students. By recording the demographic details of students attending BUdi, a general profile of users has been gained. First year students represents 90% of attendees and 34% of attendees have English as an additional language. Approximately 50% of students are under 22 years of age. Male students consistently comprise around 40% of BUdi's clients, which exceeds the 34:66 male-to-female ratio on campus. In addition, BUdi is attended by a number of students with disabilities and is popular with international students.

Data collection

To evaluate the impact of BUdi, interviews were conducted with seven faculty teachers and co-ordinators responsible for first year courses in 2009 (n = 4) and 2011 (n = 3). A focus group of student users (n = 10) was conducted in 2010 and an anonymous online student survey has been administered each year from 2010: 2010 (n = 56), 2011 (45), and 2012 (25), a total of 126. In addition, ANOVA dataset tests have been conducted from 2009 to 2011 to compare student assessment results. The online student surveys conducted have gathered comments and likert scale responses on a range of questions in relation to the perceived impact BUdi had on the student's experience. These surveys indicated that 40% of these students had attended BUdi more than three times and

that 70 % would use it again. Of interest, 25% of respondents to the online survey had not accessed any form of support other than BUdi. This profile suggests that BUdi is attractive to students who do not traditionally engage with university support services. Comments from the focus group and survey responses have been analysed to identify common themes emerging in relation to students' perceptions about BUdi. These will be presented in the following section.

Data presentation

Understanding the process required for a good assessment product

One intention of providing support in a collaborative manner to students is to raise student awareness about their individual research and writing skill levels and understand that these skills are interconnected in a process. To this end, questions were posed in the focus group and survey to explore students' perceptions of their understanding of the skill process required to produce, improve and polish their assessment products. Comments indicated that attending BUdi had influenced students to become more self-reflective about their work: *It encouraged me to change my assignment and work further on it to get a HD...even though I was disappointed as I thought all the hard work had been done. Students commented that the feedback gained from consultation at Budi also helped in understanding why things have to go through the processes they do [and]...has allowed me to approach topics differently than before.*

Peer-to-peer learning and student connections

Students reported that at BUdi they had the opportunity to benefit from other students' experience and in some cases make connections. Many students indicated they gained from the advice provided to their peers: *Listening to other students' questions and answers is a tremendous help ... as I observed I got to understand how they could help me with my assessment.* Students suggested that they benefited from "listening in" at the shared group space provided by BUdi as often advice being offered to others was useful to them as well. *People ask questions that you haven't thought of yet, and so I find that valuable too ... that when you get to that point, you've already got the answer.*

Students reported on enjoying the opportunity to share ideas and at times suggested that they had gained inspiration from other students: *I was able to find a girl that was standing next to me who was able to help me with my work and my questions, and I was able to help her out too.* Another common theme from feedback was that there was a sense of being *in the same boat*, which was of comfort to anxious students and made them *feel less isolated*, and in some cases, led to them *setting up networks*, as was pointed out in the focus group.

A safe and non-threatening space

Several respondents suggested that they were more confident about approaching experts in a less threatening environment where other students were also seeking support. Some student comments suggested that they were unsure and apprehensive but felt more confident to approach staff in the BUdi space: *It is a*

little more personal and I don't feel like I'm invading my tutor's time when it is drop-in. And: I wasn't sure how to ask for advice or whether the question was really significant to make an appointment about. Students also indicated that they liked the "informal" nature of BUdi and that the drop-in concept encouraged them to use it in the first place: *It's a daunting process walking into the room as a 19 year old. I was very uneasy about attending but went anyway.*

In addition to reducing anxiety about the assessment task for many of the first year students, comments from students also reported that BUdi gave them a sense of being less isolated and had helped build confidence and even perseverance in some instances: *As a first year student it took a lot of stress off my shoulders, worrying if my assignments were done right in the right order.* One student, who admitted in an email that she had considered "dropping out" in the first weeks of semester, also commented that BUdi's *personal approach gave me a sense of belonging and connectiveness (sic), that there were academic staff who cared about the individual students and their need to achieve.* Another theme that has emerged is that BUdi make students feel secure as it represents a type of "safety net", even when they no longer feel a need to attend. A return to study student commented that:

I really struggled with managing my learning again but the BUdi program meant that when I felt a little lost, I could check in, give myself a nudge back in the right direction and keep going! Now in my third year, I find it much easier to stay on track but every now and again it's good to know I have BUdi to give me clarity.

A number of students with disabilities have also attended BUdi over time. One student, who is in a wheelchair and uses a touch

tablet to communicate with others, attended BUdi in 2011 and 2012 for support on several subjects. She commented that:

BUdi has been a beacon of light for me after returning to formal tertiary education. It is convenient, no booking, and the support - writing, referencing and tutor/lecturer expertise - is all in one convenient and accessible location. I would recommend BUdi to any student, new or old to academic learning, the friendly and warm atmosphere is delightful too.

Another student with ADHD, who gained six distinctions and two credits in his first year of study, provided comment in 2010 that:

BUdi is solely responsible for instilling in me the belief that I could succeed at university. For someone with my disorder, it ensured that I found a mode that suited me best. I would just sit in BUdi and listen to other students get help and learn. That gave my overloaded brain clarity. The confidence instilled in me was the driving force in generating my self-belief that I could work and study.

Assessment results (ANOVA test)

The majority of students who attend BUdi (56%) make their initial visit for assessment support in the first year core business course (COR 110). A one-way ANOVA of the dataset assessment results from COR110 students in 2009, 2010, and 2011 was run and it was found that there were significant differences in the performance of students who had attended BUdi (mean score of 78.2) and those who had not (mean score of 64) $F(1,450) = 95.77, p = .00$. This suggests that attending BUdi had a positive impact on the overall assessment performance of the COR 110 students attending this service.

Discussion

Data collected to date indicates that, for a range of students, BUdi provides an improved assessment experience as they benefit from concurrent access to a variety of skill experts and content teachers. Students also report that they enjoy and benefit from the chance to work with their peers whilst they engage in the assessment process. These findings are supported in terms of recent literature on student expectations and engagement statistics. A large amount of learning occurs through an enriched student experience and in participation informally outside the lectures and classrooms (Tinto, 2006-2007). Thus, faculty culture and behaviour play an important role in building interactions and relationships with students for a better sense of socialisation, engagement and learning at university. Further, Donnison, Edwards, Itter, Martin, and Yager (2009) highlight the value of collaboration between different departments to create student *communities of learning*. A recent study into over 3,000 commencing students' expectations in South Australia (Scutter, Palmer, Luzecky, Burke de Silva, & Brinkworth, 2011) indicates that most students expect easy access to teaching staff outside of teaching and that feedback on drafts would be important for learning and success. Having friends to provide support was seen as important by 91% of these students. However, it should be noted that only 10% of first year university students in 2009 reported as engaging in outside of class interaction by discussing ideas from class with teaching staff (Australasian Survey of Student Engagement [AUSSE], 2010). It is clear that the perception students have of the institution providing supportive learning environments needs to be positive and is crucial to a whole of university experience. This reinforces the need for

support services to be made explicit by staff and be more available to students. Our data suggests that the employment of the collaborative model has helped to address some of these needs at USC.

Our collaborative model grew from a rethinking of the best way to provide support to a diverse range of first year students. It is also founded on the belief that the collaborative approach enables all students to be exposed to learning opportunities that foster individual learning, skill improvement and provide a positive experience. Looking at the profile and responses of BUdi users has shown that the service has proven beneficial to a diverse range of learners. Universities are now faced with larger cohorts, which are more diverse with respect to prior learning, academic ability, and cultural background and students spend significantly less time on campus than they used to (AUSSE, 2010; Beckman & Rayner, 2011; Kift et al., 2010; James, Krause, & Jennings, 2010;). In line with the widening of participation agenda in Australian universities, feedback from our first year students reflect that they are on a journey, starting from different points, to becoming self-managed learners. Nelson, Creagh, Kift, and Clarke (2010) emphasise that approaches and principles to student learning engagement in first year must be socially just, in order to enable success for such diversity. Further, Lawrence (2005) has been critical of the so-called *deficit* approach, where the focus has been on fixing problems generated by diversity. The fact that BUdi provides a support service that is accessible and beneficial to a wide range of students has promoted much interest in the collaborative support model at USC.

Due to the holistic nature of this assessment support model, it is challenging to ascertain the direct impact BUdi has on students who engage with this service. Even though students accessing BUdi report an improved assessment experience, it is difficult to gather data that links this directly to this particular initiative stemming from the collaborative model. A more thorough evaluation of this service needs to be performed using a larger sample size to provide stronger evidence as to its full impact on the student assessment experience. Feedback on BUdi over time has been positive but has also offered areas open to improvement, and some of these have been acted on more recently. Student feedback has indicated a desire for smaller wait times in busy weeks, a greater range of content support to be available, the offering of more than one session per week and potentially developing an on-line version of BUdi. More significantly, comments such as *It was the most helpful experience at university so far. I would love it if every course had something like BUdi*, has led to the BUdi initiative being replicated in other faculty programs. In 2012, this collaborative model has been established in the Psychology, Arts and Social Sciences programs (PASSdi) and also into the Health program (HEIdi) in response to feedback that BUdi facilitates better support for first year students. Future research is planned to gather data on other benefits of this model. The potential impact of the model on health promotion and socialisation are noted as areas for further investigation. In addition to students, staff report on gaining benefits from engaging with this collaborative model of support. Further research is planned to identify and describe the benefits of the collaborative model from a staff perspective.

This model has clearly developed better collegial relationships between support staff and the business faculty since its inception in 2008. One comment from a course coordinator echoes opinion that the collaboration is viewed as a valuable approach to teaching and learning:

Embedding the dual delivery of these skills service into a faculty specific program, particularly, in light of the interaction that is developed with skills support and the individual course coordinators, enables a higher level of understanding in students. Providing generic researching and writing skills separately can mean that students focus on one or the other rather than taking a holistic approach.

Due to this collaborative and integrated model, stronger inter-disciplinary partnerships have emerged within USC. The academic skills advisor and librarian are now consulted about course design, such as the instructions for assessment tasks in course outlines, and are invited to participate in faculty planning days. By further exploring the benefits of providing collaborative academic support, it is envisaged that better foundations can be built to promote the development of sustainable practices, supportive environments and university-wide collaborations that create a holistic community for students and staff to engage with.

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