

For the development, implementation and review of Individual Learning Plans in Allied Health which successfully respect and support first year students as individuals

Overview of particular contribution and context

The physiotherapy (PT) and occupational therapy (OT) disciplines at JCU share six common subjects in the program. The profiles of the students who enter these programs vary with respect to demographic background and in their desire to become health professionals. While recognising these commonalities, our students are increasingly from diverse backgrounds, including international students, and each student has unique requirements to enable them to successfully complete their studies. While the majority of students complete the program in two years, others leave the program without completing or, due to poor academic achievement, have an extended study.

Factors previously suggested to influence academic success include personality, motivation, study style (Farmer, 1998), learning style, educational strategies used by students (Yeung, Read & Schmid, 2005), students' engagement and satisfaction with the university, their financial situation, career orientation and social support (Ozga & Schweitzer, 2001; Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998). JCU has a large number of students who are first in the family to attend university (39%), come from a rural and remote background with family support on average 687 kms away to support their studies (63%) and are from lower socio-economic backgrounds. These known risk factors to success in tertiary education often result in greater transition to students in the first year. In acknowledgement of these

of access and participation". Furthermore, by enabling students to identify and develop their own problem-solving abilities, the ILP process contributes to the development of graduate attributes. This project elicits student engagement and enables staff to work with students in that process positively and supportively, strengthening staff/student relationships.

These issues reflect the challenges of increased inclusive entry to tertiary programs across the sector. Demographics indicate a higher proportion of at risk students in Australian Universities and hence our success in this initiative will have utility at other universities who share similar demographics.

Criterion 4: Respect and support for the development of students as individuals.

The objectives of the ILP are to:

Give students ownership and responsibility for their learning and academic progress. The ILP makes students to consider their goals, identify obstacles to the attainment of their goals and develop strategies to overcome these obstacles.

Identify challenges which impact upon students' learning. The ILP assists in identifying issues before they become problems; provides an opportunity to discuss face to face with students their feelings and experiences regarding PT or OT; directs students to other programs appropriate (and if we cannot work together on a solution to their difficulties); provides information about why students choose to leave university (especially withdrawal date); identifies, early on, students who may benefit from additional academic or personal support.

Refer to services. Identify appropriate services to support students e.g. Learning skills for time management, exam strategies, academic writing, Unihealth or counselling services.

Establish the expectations of the discipline (and the program) regarding professional responsibility; explain policies and attendance and behavioural requirements.

Establish a connection. Students know at least one staff member. Engage students in program. Student mentors from a similar background are provided for those who would benefit from this type of support.

ILPs support effective and empathetic guidance and advising of students. ILPs are undertaken face to face which

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partying was part of life but that limiting it to two nights should allow the student to succeed academically and still enjoy an active social life. This student commented that "Made me see the need for balance."

Monitor and respond to demographic subgroup differences and their impact on engagement. Students have the

Early identification of academic support needs: It is not that some students with low entry level needed higher levels of support than others. Previously these students struggled or indeed failed assessment pieces.

The ILP process has enhanced the overall learning experience of allied health students. "With that in mind, I wouldn't have and therefore I would be lost as to how to succeed in my studies." "In my previous study was nothing like this, maybe if there had been I would not have withdrawn."

Increased student retention at JCU. The ILP has provided pastoral care resulting in student retention in the programs. "I am terribly home sick and don't want to live away from home ... I don't know if I would still be here if it wasn't for your help and support."

The ILP has also provided previously unavailable information about why students leave the programs and why they go. Prior to implementation of the ILPs an average of 7% of commencing students left each year without staff knowledge of why. Since the commencement of the ILP that percentage has reduced to less than 1%. Personal reasons for withdrawing have included financial or family health issues, pregnancy, partner moving with defence forces, a break from study, realising that they have chosen the wrong reasons such as pressure from family and poor advice regarding program selection.

In 2005, prior to the implementation of the physical therapy ILP, 8% of commencing first year students left the program and JCU in the first year, of these 1.6% cited personal reasons. After the ILP 1.6% transferred to another program at JCU. Between 2006 and 2009, since commencing ILPs, only 2% of commencing first year students have left the program at JCU and of these 1% were for personal reasons. 45% of these students transferred to other programs at JCU. Hence, although the number of withdrawals from the program has remained fairly constant, the number of students leaving JCU has decreased dramatically. No first year student who commenced PT in 2008 or 2009 has left JCU. Since the inception of ILPs and OT students have utilised this process to discuss transfer options within the university or a planned deferral and return at a later stage. Students feel supported in their decision to transfer programs and want to stay at JCU. This is evidenced by this student "This is not like my previous university it actually feels as if you care about whether I pass or fail."

Conclusion This initiative is sustainable and currently year 5. The use of ILPs has provided an emerging profile of our students needs and has informed the content and procedure for implementation of the ILP and the information that is provided to students during 'O' week which supports the ILP process. Further it has provided the disciplines with valuable information regarding student transfers and withdrawal from JCU. The process and document is regularly reviewed and refined to ensure its relevance to each year level. This process is undertaken in consideration of student feedback and in consultation with all team members. All members of the team are committed to continued use of the ILP and it is supported at all levels within the disciplines. It remains a standing agenda item in staff meetings and information gathered is disseminated at all levels. It is envisaged that within OT it will be further developed for use with their external students, as this cohort presents with its own unique demographic. Further development of this initiative provides opportunity for the team and JCU to continue to be at the forefront of recognition and support of the individual diversity of our students.

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