

***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 first year. The profiles of the students who enter these programs are similar with respect to demographic background and in their desire to become health professionals. While recognising these commonalities, our students are increasingly coming from diverse backgrounds, including international and Indigenous students, and each student has unique requirements to enable them to successfully complete their studies. While the majority of students complete the programs in four years, others leave the program without completing or, due to poor academic achievement, have an extended period of study.

Factors previously suggested to influence academic success include personality, motivation, study style (Morris & Farmer, 1998), learning style, educational strategies utilised by students (Yeung, Read & Schmid, 2005), students' engagement and satisfaction with the university, their financial situation, career orientation and social support (McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001; Ozga & Sukhandan, 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, work 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 transitional change for students in the first year. In acknowledgement of these factors and to engage, support and retain students by recognising individuality and diversity, PT implemented Individual Learning Plans (ILPS) for first year students in 2006 and OT followed in 2007.

In parallel with and informing the development of the ILP has been a longitudinal study of allied health student characteristics commenced by the team in 2006. Written student reflections about the experience of the first few weeks of university confirm that university life can be daunting and more difficult than students expect, both socially and academically. Thematic analysis of the reflections identified four primary issues for first year students:

(1) Leaving home to attend university was daunting; *"While my home is only 400km away it is still a daunting experience moving away from home to a place where I did not know anybody. The thought of university frightened me." "I felt that being bombarded with all of this new information, in this new environment, with all of these new faces in such a short space of time was very daunting and overwhelming." "The most intimidating factor that I found was that I knew absolutely no-one in Townsville."*

(2) The requirements of tertiary education were much higher than expected; *"The university workload is enormous, compared to high school. In high school I was able to cram a whole semester worth of work into a single weekend before a test. However, the workload at university is heavy and I have realised that if I were to continue to employ the same work habits as I did in high school, I would be setting myself up for failure."*

*"Trying to find a balance between university, work and leisure has proved a challenge, especially as my university contact hours are fairly spread out, meaning I have ended up working predominantly weekends."*

(3) Students found it difficult to manage their time and organise their workload; *"At school you would have either your parents or teachers chasing you up for assignments and studying. Whereas at university it's the opposite as it's the students' responsibility to make sure everything is done in time. I felt more comfortable at school learning because I was constantly pushed." "I did not feel confident in my organisation of things that I needed and things I had to do."*

(4) Loss of social support systems; *"Although there were many people whom I knew prior to my studies at James Cook University (JCU), I personally felt that making friends with new people was quite difficult." "Two of the main aspects of uni that have been especially daunting are assessment tasks and making friends."*

The first few weeks of university study are traditionally a time when students become overwhelmed and leave university. It is in these first weeks of enrolment that the ILP team undertake individual interviews with each student and tailor collaborative strategies for success, including student mentors where appropriate. The student reflections highlight the importance of social supports through this particularly difficult stage and in the absence of accessible friends and family, the ILP initiative has provided crucial support, and helped students develop a sound foundation for a positive learning experience throughout their course. This 'just in time' approach ensures student involvement in their own learning experience by focusing on their academic goals and needs.

This initiative influences the students' learning experience and reflects the guiding principle of the JCU Strategic Plan and Priorities, "To deliver education to all those who desire it" and "The provision of services to students ensures equity

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, fostering positive and supportive staff /student relationships.

These issues reflect the challenges of increased inclusive entry to tertiary programs across the sector. JCU demographics indicate a higher proportion of at risk students than most 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 performance.* The ILP asks 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 expectations regarding PT or OT; directs students to other programs where appropriate (and if we cannot work together on a solution to their difficulties); provides information about why students choose to leave university (especially before 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 profession).* Engender 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 immediately communicates to the student that the staff member has time for them and is interested in them as an individual. Face to face contact is important for both the staff and student in order to develop a relationship. An online trial of the ILP process in 2009 resulted in only 24% of the PT first year students completing the ILP compared to 95% in 2008, when delivered in a face to face method. Students have reported that one of the most important aspects of the ILP is the opportunity to spend one on one time with a staff member, thus we have continued with a commitment to face to face ILP implementation. ILPs are mandatory in first year and optional in second year. The uptake in second year is approximately 30%, with students reporting that they feel the first year planning supports them into second year. The individual interview, in the first weeks of the student's enrolment in their chosen degree, ensures we are able to engage with students and develop strategies before potential difficulties become overwhelming for them.

As outlined below and supported by student comments, the ILP initiative addresses many of the strategies for success at University identified by Krause (2005):

***Value academic work and high standards:*** This process actively engages the student and staff mentor in the development of a plan that encourages a commitment to study, with identified goals and a 'roadmap' for the successful attainment of these goals.

Student comments: *"I don't feel that I know how to start an assignment. I wasn't able to get to the workshop run in O- week. This [learning skills online web info] is very helpful. Thanks for showing it to me."*

*"It helped me focus on the specific amount that I needed to do."*

*"I had never sat down and thought about goals before."*

***Ensure that expectations are explicit and responsive, acknowledge the challenges in students' lives and provide targeted self-management strategies:*** Prior to the ILP interview students consider their expectations and identify risks or obstacles to their attainment. Realistic goals and strategies for success are developed collaboratively, according to the needs of each individual, recognising the diversity and uniqueness of each student and ensuring that where equity issues are present, they are addressed proactively.

Student comment: *"I have moved from Ingham but am not worried about home sickness as 12 other friends from school have also come to JCU. I am concerned that partying may distract me from study".* The mentor acknowledged that

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

**Monitor and respond to demographic subgroup differences and their impact on engagement:** Students have the opportunity to discuss issues related to their demographic background and are supported to identify strategies to enhance their engagement with discipline staff and students and the wider university community.

Student comment: *"Just having coffee with someone who understood made all the difference"*. Student mentors are often used to support students, for example those that are homesick are supported by their peers from the previous year as are mature aged students.

*"English is not my first language but I am not an international student so I didn't know where to go for help"*.

This student was given information about learning advisers and support for non-English speaking background (NESB) students.

**Support and engagement of teaching colleagues:** Currently all first year PT and OT teaching staff participate in ILPs. This recognises the essential pastoral role of the first year teacher as a mentor, and also provides an important support group within the staff where strategies can be discussed and active research and refinement of the ILP occurs. In addition, this initiative employs a multi disciplinary team approach which fosters increased understanding and collaboration.

**Ways in which the contribution has influenced student learning, engagement and or overall experience, been sustained over time, and been recognised by fellow staff, the institution, and or the broader community.**

#### ***Recognition within the broader community***

**Internal Peer Review:** Allied Health at JCU is increasingly recognised as one of the university leaders in student support. This is evidenced by the adoption of the ILP by numerous individuals and schools within JCU and the citation of this initiative by JCU as a model for good practice in student advising and curriculum design. The ILP and the longitudinal student study have resulted in the following conference presentations and publications in refereed journals:

Bonassi, M (2007) *Individual Learning Plans*. Presented at JCU Teaching and Learning Showcase

Gray MA., Pearce W., Gordon S., Thomas, Y., Mylne T., Millsteed, J. (2007). *Success in Rural and Remote Allied Health Education Programs*. In: Proceedings of the 9<sup>th</sup> State Conference. OT Australia – QLD (Oral: Yeppoon, 21<sup>st</sup> – 22<sup>nd</sup> September, 2007).

Jones, A. & Sheppard, L. (2007). Physiotherapy education: a proposed evidence- based model. *Advances in Physiotherapy*, 4, 1- 5.

Nielsen, I & Jones, A. (2006). *Individual Learning Plans*. Presented at JCU first year experience teaching showcase.

**External Peer Review :** The ILP program has been reviewed by Professor Keithia Wilson from Griffith University, a national First Year Experience champion. She has affirmed the value of the program, commenting that - *"The ILP is an authentic attempt to engage with a whole of student perspective, and evidences a clear appreciation of the complexity of the student transition process, and the importance of the personal and vocational as well as the academic domains of transition. The fact that this program has been implemented in other disciplines at JCU, indicates not only its Institutional success at JCU, but also its wider generalisability to the higher education sector."* Further, UQ is currently considering implementing the ILP in their undergraduate cohort.

#### ***Student perspective***

When surveyed regarding the usefulness of the ILP, 59% of 2008 first year students agreed that the ILP aided in identifying academic goals, 53% stated that it was one of the three most effective ways of goal setting, 49% stated that it encouraged them to approach a staff member when they had concerns and 37% stated that it aided them in transition to university.

**Increasing student engagement with academic staff and peers:** Academic staff play a key role in facilitating student engagement with their program, peers and the university community as a whole. Since the ILPs were initiated there is clear evidence of an increase in the proportion of first year students who engage with academic staff by seeking advice on a regular basis. This has resulted in timely action to prevent withdrawal or failure due to personal reasons. Engagement of students with their peers through mentoring has also fostered a greater sense of community: *"It felt good to be able to help someone else and made me feel I had a role in helping the first years and that my experience mattered."*

*Early identification of academic support needs: It was identified that some students with low entry level scores 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: "If I hadn't been required to do this I wouldn't have and therefore I would be lost as to how to succeed in my studies." "In my previous studies there 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 know if I want to live away from home ... To be honest 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 where 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, needing a break from study, realising that they have chosen a program for the wrong reasons such as pressure from family and poor advice regarding program selection.

In 2005, prior to the implementation of the physiotherapy ILP, 8% of commencing first year students left the program and JCU in the first year, of these 1.6% cited personal reasons. A further 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 and JCU and of these 1% were for personal reasons. A further 4.5% of students transferred to other programs at JCU. Hence, although the number of withdrawals from the PT program has remained fairly constant, the number of students leaving JCU has decreased dramatically. In fact no first year student who commenced PT in 2008 or 2009 has left JCU. Since the inception of ILPs PT 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 change programs and want to stay at JCU. As evidenced by this student quote, *"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 in its 5<sup>th</sup> year. 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 withdrawals 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 the 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 individual disciplines. It remains a standing agenda item in staff meetings and information gathered is disseminated at all levels as required. 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. The 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 individuality and diversity of our students.

## References in text

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