

STUDENTS ARE AT THE HEART OF OUR UNIVERSITY

THIS EXEMPLAR IS DESIGNED BY THE GOOD PRACTICE PROJECT WITH DR. TERESA O'CONNOR, SENIOR LECTURER ACADEMIC SUPPORT WITH THE SCHOOL OF MEDICINE AND DENTISTRY

JCU's Learning, Teaching and Assessment Policy contains nine core principles, the first of which informs our practice of its commitment to respond to the student voice; to working in partnership with our students, and that students influence the design of their courses through their participation within appropriate committees.

Dr Teresa O'Connor is a Senior Lecturer with the School of Medicine and Dentistry, whose role is to provide Academic Support (AS) for students in the medicine program. The course has secured accreditation with a unique structure encompassing its course design and support programs that effectively eases students' transition into University and Medicine, and throughout the first three years of the course. This exemplar shows that 'students are at the heart of our University.'

The medicine program is demanding and for this reason, several systems are in place to monitor students' progress and support them within the course. During the first three years of the program students cover the basic sciences, including social sciences, on which the final 3 clinical years of the program are built. The course is structured differently from the traditional 8 subjects per year courses. Each 12-unit subject contains several modules. Students are enrolled in one 12-unit subject during the first study period and one 12-unit subject during the second study period. The two 12-unit subjects for the year are linked and students have to pass the whole year to progress to the next level. This model is unusual and can be demanding of students. Those students who fail the year are required to repeat the entire year.

Orientation to JCU and the School of Medicine

Med 1 students are introduced to the Faculty of Medicine, Health and Molecular Sciences (FMHMS) and its School of Medicine and Dentistry including the First Year Academic Coordinator, some teaching and support staff, Student Mentors and the JCU Medical Students Association (JCUMSA) during Orientation. In week one, students are orientated into the medicine program.

The first year coordinator and a number of the teaching staff are introduced and provide an introduction to the teaching practices by way of practical exemplars. This introduction to teaching practices helps students become familiar with the way in which the program is set up and the course is taught. The Academic Support system (AS) is introduced as are a number of other support initiatives that in essence embed first year students in a culture of support within the School of Medicine. These include the home group program and some targeted sessions around study skills and time management.

The teaching week for most modules is comprised of a one hour signature lecture which introduces the material for the week, a three hour guided learning session where students undertake a range of activities, some of which are self-directed, and a synthesising session at the end of the week which draws together the concepts taught. Clinical and professional skills are taught from the first semester of the program.

PREDICTING STUDENTS POTENTIAL FOR ACADEMIC RISK

Along with several other schools at JCU, all students in Med 1 undertake a post enrolment language assessment task early in the first study period. Those students identified as requiring assistance are referred to learning support for writing skills development. This is a compulsory component of the course. Through some analysis of results over several years the School of Medicine has found there are some reliable predictors of underprepared academic performance. These include irregular attendance record, the results of the second quiz (held in Week 8 or 9) for Med 1 students and the mid-year exam results. Med 1 students who underperform in the second quiz of the first study period are contacted by the AS Senior Lecturer and asked to meet with her to discuss their study habits and to determine what interventions may be needed to enhance their performance.

Dr O'Connor tells us that it is rare to have a student absent without leave as the School quickly identifies students who have disengaged with the program and actively works to support these students deal with the issues they are facing. With the volume of work for each study period, those students who fall behind in their studies often have difficulty catching up. The value of asking to see the students who have been identified as at risk of low academic achievement well before the mid-year exams is that they have the opportunity to make changes that promote academic success.

SPECIFIC SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Home Group Program

The Home Group Program fosters students in climate of care within the medical course. Students are allocated to home groups of 8-10 students in a group that meets weekly. The Home Group Program runs for the first three years of the course and attendance is monitored. The home group program provides an avenue for pastoral care while assisting students develop team work and conflict management skills. Students change home groups every year. In the first year of the program the home group is facilitated by an academic staff member or health professional while in later years the groups are usually facilitated by a senior medical student. These medical students gain experience as facilitators by co-facilitating the Med 1 groups with the clinician or academic staff member.

Study Skills sessions and other support

Implemented in 2011, the Study Skills session aims to help students understand what it takes to succeed as a medical student in the program. Students from higher years, share their experiences offering insights about how they managed to find balance in their life with the large study load, and offer their views as to what it takes to succeed in Med One. The JCU Counseling Service runs sessions on time management early in the semester and later in the semester provides sessions about achieving balance in life and surviving exams. Students are also able to access private tutoring from senior medical students. A register of those students interested in tutoring who achieved grades of Credit or above in previous years is developed at the beginning of each academic year by the Student Academic Support staff. This register is loaded onto the appropriate LearnJCU subject site.

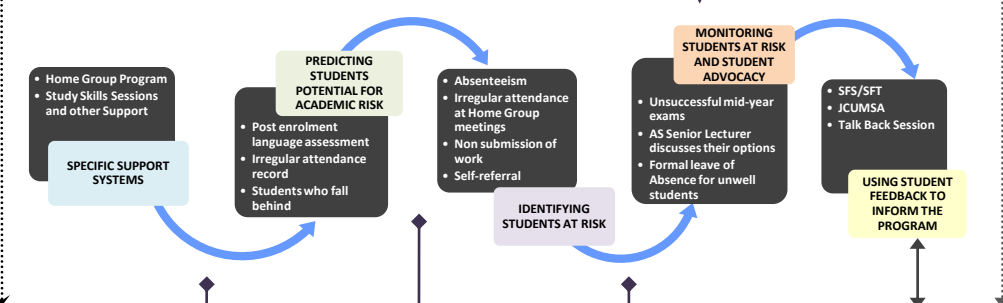


Diagram 1: Medicine students are embedded into a culture of support throughout the first three years of the course, within the School of Medicine.

IDENTIFYING STUDENTS AT RISK

There are a number of ways used to identify students at risk with the purpose of providing early intervention, enabling students to engage in and make better decisions about different aspects of their learning. In addition, the AS Senior Lecturer explains the role of AS to students early in the year and encourages students to self-refer if they have any concerns or questions about the program. Irregular home group attendance; absenteeism at sign-in sessions monitored throughout the year; non submission of required documents, and low achievement in particular assessment tasks all alert the AS Senior Lecturer (ASSL) that the student may have some issues that need attention.

- Students' attendance at classes is monitored in at least four sessions per week during the first year of the program. Students who have not attended about 80% of classes are contacted by the ASSL and asked to explain why they are not attending. Students with health and other issues are often identified through this process.
- Home group facilitators monitor students weekly attendance and the ASSL is informed about students who fail to attend two or more consecutive meetings or other students whom the home group facilitator is concerned about. These students are also asked to meet the ASSL and often some particular issues are identified.
- Non submission of work is monitored. Students are required to submit particular paperwork as part of the course and by a certain date. These include Blue Card application, evidence of Hepatitis B vaccination and sero-conversion and current First Aid certificate. Failing to do so by this date is often the result of students having trouble organising themselves. By identifying these students early the AS Senior Lecturer is able to work with them to overcome their obstacles.

Self-referral

The AS Senior Lecturer has a presence on campus and in a support and advocacy role within the School of Medicine and Dentistry. Students will sometimes self-refer for academic support. There is a self booking appointment system available on the LearnJCU subject site where students can make an appointment to see her. Strategies for managing any issues the student has are discussed and when appropriate students are referred to other support agencies, such as learning advisers, AccessAbility, the JCU Counselling service, local medical services, and the International Student Support Office. The AS Senior Lecturer is able to advocate on behalf of students with teaching staff to help support students and at times also liaises with the JCU accommodation colleges if there are particular issues for a student.

MONITORING STUDENTS AT RISK AND STUDENT ADVOCACY

Students are not left to fail over and over again. Students who fail their mid-year exams find it extremely challenging to pass the year overall. The AS Senior Lecturer meets with these students to discuss with them their options. Some students elect to formally withdraw from the year without academic penalty and return to study next year. Others elect to continue the course, regardless of whether they will pass or fail.

Students who are repeating a year meet together with the AS Senior Lecturer early in the repeat year. The aim of this meeting is to assist students make the transition as for many of them failing the previous year resulted in loss of confidence and for some a sense of embarrassment. These students are monitored during the repeat year and if they continue to struggle with the material are counseled about considering other options for study. The experience of the School has been that some students choose the wrong course initially and go on to thrive in other fields of study.

Students with health problems are referred to their general practitioner, or UniHealth; or Headspace or JCU's Counseling Services and are followed up. There is a formal system in place enabling students who are unwell to apply for sick leave and those with significant health problems are encouraged to take Leave of Absence to resolve their challenges and return next year. The AS Senior Lecturer has a student advocacy role on the School's Assessment Committee and the Foundations Sciences Committee.

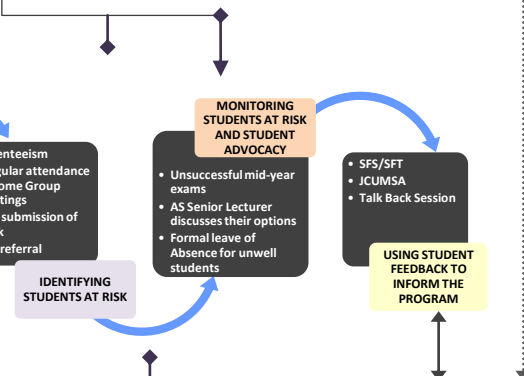


Diagram 2: Monitoring Students at Risk and Student Advocacy.

USING STUDENT FEEDBACK TO INFORM THE PROGRAM

Teaching staff receive student feedback from SFS/SFT systems and they use this feedback to make changes to the subject materials or presentation if appropriate. They then inform the students of the changes they have made. The aim is to encourage students to provide feedback.

The School has several active student bodies. The JCU Medical Students Association (JCUMSA) has a strong role in advocating for students and providing student input into changes being made within the program. JCUMSA is well respected by the School and monthly meetings are held between the School and JCUMSA. These meetings are chaired by the Head of School and attended by the Director of Foundation Studies; Director of Medical Education and Director of Students with representatives of JCUMSA executive.

In addition students participate in the design of the MBBS course through the role JCUMSA has in the school committees. It sits on the School's Assessment Committee and the Personal and Professional Development Committee. Each year of the program has two elected JCUMSA representatives who represent the views of the student body and take particular issues that arise to the Academic Coordinator of their year or the Director of Students.

An additional feedback mechanism is the 'Talk Back Session' held each semester with each year's cohort. These sessions are attended by Head of Schools; Director of Medical Education and Director of Students and the School senior staff inform students about current events and students are encouraged to raise issues within their course.

'Students are at the heart of or University' is what Core Principle 1 of JCU's Learning, Teaching and Assessment Policy states. This good practice exemplar has shown that Med 1 students and their older peers are wholly embedded within every aspect of the medicine program, sharing a system of support and activities designed to buffer students from disengaging with the program and that student feedback is highly valued by the program.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION ABOUT ANY ASPECT OF THIS EXEMPLAR, PLEASE EMAIL [Dr Teresa O'Connor](mailto:Dr.Teresa.O'Connor@jcu.edu.au) AT teresa.oconnor@jcu.edu.au

JCU Medical Students Association: MOREATJCUMSA
JCU Learning, Teaching and Assessment Policy and its Core Principles: MOREATJCU