

## The first year experience of social work students: Developing a “sense of fit” and engagement with the profession. A Practice Report

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### Abstract

*Engagement is believed to be critical to a successful first year experience. This paper examines a range of strategies introduced into a first year Social Work and Human Services unit at Queensland University of Technology. The focus of these strategies was to enhance student engagement through building connections with peers, lecturers and the Social Work and Human Services professions. It is argued in this paper that students are more likely to continue with their studies if they are supported in building an emerging identity as both a university student and as a Social Work or Human Services practitioner. A range of strategies was introduced, including restructuring the unit to include an early intensive teaching block; inviting current practitioners to speak with students about the realities of practice; and embedding an academic skills component into the unit. Feedback from students highlighted the success of these strategies in developing their academic skills, building connections and embedding a sense of fit with the profession.*

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## Introduction

The Social Work profession seeks new graduates who have a clear sense of good practice, the profession, and how they fit. Students often come into Social Work and Human Services (SWHS) degrees motivated by a desire to “help.” However, students may find this passion diminishing in the face of the realities of university learning and an increasing depth of understanding of the complexity of social work. This practice report examines the notion that by using strategies to harness students’ passion and drive, social work education should enhance students’ sense of being supported and connected to their goal.

This paper examines strategies for enhancing student engagement among first year SWHS students. It examines the importance of students developing a sense of connection to the profession to enhance their “sense of fit,” and their identity as a student. We argue that establishing an early understanding of and reflection on what the profession is and where students see themselves in it, assists student engagement and therefore retention. The strategies were introduced in 2012 in a core first year unit of both the Bachelor of Social Work and the Bachelor of Human Services degrees at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Brisbane, Australia. The unit, *Orientation to Social Work and Human Services* (SWB100), is a compulsory first year unit for all students enrolled in these degrees and is offered in both semesters. The unit explains the role and scope of social work and human services, the professional standards, and explores students’ own emerging professional identity. The unit is delivered in intensive mode for the first three weeks followed by fortnightly lectures and

tutorials focused on “threshold concepts” (Meyer & Land, 2006), essential to an understanding of social issues, and professional practice.

## Background/rationale

The primary aim of social work and human services practice is to improve the quality of life and wellbeing of individuals, families, groups and communities. Social work is a value-based profession (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2008). People enter the profession with a commitment to “help” people which is framed by their personal values and beliefs. An essential aspect of social work education is the development of a practice framework that incorporates professional values along with an awareness of how personal values shape and inform practice. In the discipline of social work, this is referred to as being critically reflective (Fook, 2002). Humphrey (2011) refers to the challenging of students’ values and beliefs during the course of a social work degree as the “hidden curriculum.” Students do not necessarily anticipate this occurring and this can contribute to a diminished “sense of fit” for students where they believed they had “good” motives or the “right” values but now find these challenged.

Engagement is key to student success and retention (Nelson, Quinn, Marrington, & Clarke, 2012). Student engagement in first year is critical to facilitating quality learning outcomes, and curriculum design should “motivate students to learn, provide a positive learning climate, and encourage students to be active in their learning” (Kift & Field, 2009, p. 2). In the specific context of social work education, Healy and Lonne (2010) note that students’ sense of connection to their future profession is key to engagement and academic success.

## Strategies

In order to achieve our goal of building connections and enhancing students' "sense of fit," a number of strategies were adopted. Three of these—enhancing connections with peers and lecturers; understanding the profession; and academic skills—are discussed below following a brief explanation of our approach to obtaining feedback.

QUT is migrating to a new system for student feedback. In 2012, unit coordinators in the School of Public Health and Social Work were advised to develop and use unit-based feedback tools in the absence of a university wide tool. In SWB100, we actively sought feedback throughout the semester. At the end of the three-week intensive block, we asked students to identify one thing they had learned, one thing that surprised or challenged them, and one thing they still had a question about (based on the one-minute paper, Tinto, 1987). This feedback gave us an indication of how students felt by the end of that block. At the end of the semester, we sought students' written feedback on the unit content, the teaching and learning approaches, the academic skills component, the assessment tasks, and the structure of the unit. We also asked students for verbal feedback at the end of the workshop block and at the end of the semester. In addition, we invited informal feedback throughout the semester. The strategies noted above are now examined in more depth.

### *Building connections with peers and lecturers*

Building connections with peers is a significant contributor to easing the transition to university (Tinto & Goodsell,

1994). Becoming a university student can involve a significant identity shift. Students find themselves negotiating between their old life and friends and their new life and friends (Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). This is a complex process and can make the transition to university generally difficult, and for some, quite risky in that they are negotiating the transition between their old and new identities which may leave them vulnerable. Kantanis (2000) believes that the development of a network of friends at university contributed to a more successful transition. She also notes that for first year students, undertaking units with large cohorts inhibits making connections with fellow students. Strategies that enhance connection in large groups include small group learning, building a collaborative learning community, and building in opportunities to know one's fellow students (Kantanis, 2000).

In SWB100, one of the outcomes envisaged for the intensive mode was the building of connections between peers. When we asked students on their first day in the unit what concerned them most, a significant number stated that their greatest fear was they would not make friends. In the first session, we invited all the students to share their motivation for enrolling in a SWHS course. We also built in breaks throughout the day with explicit directions to spend the time talking with each other. In later feedback students identified that it was beneficial to hear other people's stories, to make friends, and to identify people who they might relate to best both personally and academically, as well as who they might try to avoid working with. The following quote from a student sums up the experience identified by many: *Workshops at the beginning of the semester are a good idea. I met other new students, helped to get my head around social work*

*and uni life. And I have people to talk to in my other classes too!*

Another focus of SWB100 was to build connections with the teaching staff. We invited academic colleagues to speak to students about their SWHS “journey.” For many, this had been via tortuous routes and extraordinary experiences. This session was extremely well received by students and served the purpose of both introducing and humanising the academic staff, and also of providing interesting insights into the field. Krause (2006) highlights the significance of facilitating such links between students and staff. Pascarella and Terenzini (cited in Krause & Coates, 2008, p. 500) confirm the importance of “academic staff involvement in the lives of undergraduate learners early and often” and this session contributed to this. In feedback, students stated that they felt their ideas and values were respected, that they felt able to interact in class, and that staff were interested in their academic progress and in their overall learning journey (Ramsden, 2003). Additionally, the two primary lecturers in SWB100 also lectured and/or tutored across other first year units, fostering a sense of continuity. This enabled content cross-referencing between units, facilitating a more integrated first year experience.

### *Understanding the profession*

Many students entering social work and human services degrees are motivated by a strong desire to “help people” (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2012). However, in our experience, many students have a limited idea of what the notion of “helping” actually entails in the complex and diverse contexts of the SWHS professions. To initiate them into the reality of the SWHS professions, and to bridge the gap between theory and practice (Henneberry &

Beshear, 1995), students heard stories from academic staff about their past experiences as practitioners, which provided some insights into the profession. However, an even greater benefit came when we invited a range of current practitioners from both government and non-government sectors to speak with our students early in the semester. “Students are interested in learning about how someone in the field that they hope to enter uses theory in their day-to-day activities” (Henneberry & Beshear, 1995, p. 16). This session stimulated their interest both in the profession and the course content. The guest speakers came from a variety of settings such as child protection, community organisations, hospital multi-disciplinary teams and so on. They each spoke for 10-15 minutes about how they had become social workers or human service workers and described their work. They also articulated their practice frameworks as we had begun to discuss the importance of professional practice frameworks in early workshops. The speakers provided personal insights into the profession and current trends. Students listened attentively and had the opportunity to ask questions, which they took up with relish. The practitioners’ personalised accounts highlighted the diversity of settings, challenges and rewards of their work as they spoke about it “warts and all.”

The impact on the students was almost tangible in the buzz, not only during the session, but also afterwards. Moreover, the impact of what the practitioners had imparted was clearly pivotal for the students as many later wrote about the experience in their essays, stating how their views on which area of social work or human services practice they considered entering had been totally transformed by what they had heard. This kind of insight

and learning cannot be gained by lecturers just talking about the work. When the stories come directly from practitioners, they truly come to life and have an inspirational effect on students' understanding of the profession. As stated by one of the students in feedback, *Best workshop was when the practitioners came. Will not forget it.* Even the hard aspects of the profession were discussed and noted by students: *Every one of the practitioners prepared me for the time when I will 'burn out', and that it's not an individual thing.* The diversity of the industry was highlighted by many students with one noting her surprise that *human services extend beyond my local drop-in centre, the scope is staggering.* A great many students in their first assessment task, which involved them reflecting on their motivation and their interest in a particular area of practice, referenced the practitioner discussion as critical in the formation of their views.

### *Academic skills*

"What and how students learn depends to a major extent on how they think they will be assessed" (Biggs & Tang, 2007, p. 163). Each of the unit's assessment tasks related to unit learning outcomes and to QUT graduate capabilities as well as Australian Association of Social Workers (2003) practice standards and Australian Community Workers Association (2012) core competencies. The first assessment required students to write a short reflective piece on their motivation to become SWHS practitioners, to consider potential areas of practice and reflect on their sense of fit. This was submitted in week four and was marked by the unit coordinator and the academic skills instructor. The "value of the first major writing assignment as a vehicle for fostering academic integration" (Krause,

2001, p. 164) cannot be overestimated. "Quality, timely feedback" (Kift & Field, 2009, p. 5) was provided to support students' understanding of what is required at tertiary level, and which could be used to develop writing skills in future assessments. Moreover, we could identify and provide additional support to students who were struggling.

It has long been acknowledged that students enter university with a wide range of academic preparedness (see, for example, Chickering & Gamson, 1987) in terms of their ability to research, think critically and write academic papers. Indeed, the effect of receiving poor grades on students' self-esteem and their motivation to continue with their course cannot be too highly emphasised (Krause, 2001). Early success, and certainly early feedback on their efforts, is extremely beneficial to academic integration and student retention (Krause, 2001).

Most students can "do it" if only they are taught "how to." Krause (2006) strongly advocates for learning *how to learn* alongside learning content. Furthermore, Kift and Field (2009) emphasise the importance of using assessment and feedback as engagement tools. With this in mind, we embedded a series of academic skills sessions into the workshops, particularly during the early weeks, thus providing contextualised academic literacy development (Krause, 2006). These included sessions on time planning across the semester, researching and structuring an academic paper, referencing and so on. A number of optional workshops were offered so that students could access extra help if they desired. Alongside developing their referencing and writing skills, students were encouraged to bring along their problems and essay drafts so that they could obtain help with specific issues

they were facing. Thus, they could feel they were part of a “community of scholars” (Krause, 2006, p. 4).

In feedback on the unit, the positive comments on the academic skills component of the unit were overwhelming. Even students who had already completed another degree or a semester of study offered very positive feedback, saying that their confidence was enhanced and that they appreciated learning precisely how to reference or to structure and write their essays, as these skills were not explicitly taught anywhere else, and it was so different from school. The vast majority of students in all forms of feedback identified the academic skills component as critical to their learning; *referencing, essay writing - provided fundamental skills for uni survival; and academic skills workshops were really useful, have used the information in all my units*. Once students feel comfortable with these skills, they are likely to fill out their identity as a student and their “sense of fit” becomes more robust. They are thus more likely to persist.

## Conclusion

The road to developing a “perfect” unit is never totally smooth. SWB100 is still a “work in progress” and, as we deliver new iterations of it, responding to student feedback, and noting the effects of our strategies on students’ sense of connection, their confidence and their writing skills, we continue to remodel the unit. One of the key things we have tried to achieve is to create a learning and teaching context which facilitates engagement and builds a learning community. The Orientation unit (SWB100) is the ideal and obvious place to do this as it is an anchor point for the first year and sets the tone for the semester. It is essentially the starting point for everything which follows. Therefore, it is critical to

engage students quickly so we can capture their initial enthusiasm by facilitating the development of a clearer understanding of their student identity and by beginning to embed a sense of fit with their chosen profession. To achieve this goal, we implemented a range of strategies, some of which have been discussed here, such as responding to the urgent need of students to feel a part of the university through social connections with their peers, and a collegial relationship with their lecturers; providing a realistic picture of the profession by inviting real practitioners into the classroom; and assisting students to develop the academic skills they need to succeed. Without these, they cannot survive at university. These strategies have been highly successful, as can be seen in the student responses.

However, despite our best efforts and the highly positive response of most students, there will always be some students who cannot be engaged or find their place as students. They may have difficulty making friends, discover they have chosen the wrong course, or just find themselves out of their depth academically, for example.

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