Engaging potential HIM students: ‘Playing sport: is it worth the risk?’

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Background
The School Partnerships Program (SPP) (2010- ) aims to increase participation at university for students who may not otherwise consider this opportunity. A four-year partnership has been formed with fifteen low socio-economic status (SES) secondary schools, each located close to one of La Trobe University’s (LTU) five Victorian campuses. The Program sits within the LTU National Recruitment team under the direction of Janne Gorman. It is overseen by two coordinators; one based in Melbourne (Jenny Snelling) and the other in Bendigo (Catherine Farrell), who work collaboratively with schools to target local needs and develop individualised programs in consultation with Faculties. In late 2011, partner schools expressed a desire for more discipline-based workshops that particularly target skill development. The University appointed SPP Officers to develop this activity strand within the SPP.

Key features of the workshops are: small-group, interactive learning experiences that aim to expand skills and increase awareness of university study and career options (approximately 90-120 minutes in length); content developed in consultation with La Trobe University Faculties; focus linked to University graduate capabilities; content consistent to existing Year 9/10 curriculum; and delivered by senior students (honours; postgraduate).

In the metropolitan area, there are approximately 2,500 Year 9/10 students in our partner schools. It is envisaged that all would participate in up to three workshops over a two-year period depending on facilitator numbers and room availability. This would equate to approximately 100 workshops in 2012 and 200 in 2013. Key objectives of the workshop aim to: increase student knowledge of disciplines and careers; expand key skills that are age and curriculum appropriate; increase student familiarity with higher education and, particularly, LTU; increase transition rates of students between Years 9, 10 and 11; and raise LTU enrolments. The Program will establish tools to measure: (a) workshop effectiveness; and (b) changes to tertiary participation rates and LTU enrolments. In 2013, the workshops will be offered again to partner schools. Faculties are invited to use the SPP Year 9/10 workshops and accompanying resources with other secondary schools.
Participation in university study

The concept of introducing high school students to university and the associated career opportunities that a university degree offers, is not new in a number of countries (see e.g. Fowler & Luna 2009; Cadeau 2011). The primary objectives of such programs are to increase the numbers of students who progress to university, with resultant benefits to both student and university. There is frequently a focus on exposing and attracting school students from low SES backgrounds to university in order to maximise the equality of educational opportunity.

In Australia, a key finding of the Commonwealth Government’s recent review of higher education was that students from low SES backgrounds are significantly under-represented in our universities (Bradley et al 2008). This has led to a policy of ‘social inclusion’, which is directed to increasing the proportion of university students from low SES backgrounds, from the current 16% to 20% by 2020. Armstrong and Cairnduff (2012) identify challenges for Australian universities in addressing this policy in light of the multiple barriers to increased participation by this category of potential students. At La Trobe University, the Department of Health Information Management is actively participating in this University’s innovative and inclusive model.

HIM workshops

At the beginning, academic staff (DW, DF, KR) from the Department of Health Information Management collaborated with the University’s Future Students Centre and, in particular, Ariana Henderson, the SPP Officer (Metro), to devise creative workshop themes based on examples of outputs of Health Information Managers’ (HIMs) work, for example: patient-controlled electronic health records; and applications of health information collected, coded, analysed and reported by HIMs throughout Australia in hospitals and other healthcare facilities, departments of health and bodies such as the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. The academic staff members then researched an agreed topic and, using this, the SPP Officer, who is an experienced teacher, created the comprehensive lesson plan designed for students in Years 9 and 10. Following a competitive selection process, including interview by staff from the Future Students Centre, three final-year Bachelor of Health Sciences and Master of Health Information Management students (AL, CN, SR) were invited to undertake the role of a Years 9 and 10 workshop facilitator in high schools affiliated with the program. The SPP Officer provided initial training for the students.

‘Playing sport: is it worth the risk?’

From the rough and tumble of the school playground to weekend sporting matches, Australians are told that sport is good for them … but is it? Through a thorough investigation process, students reflect on their own personal experiences of sport injury and examine statistical information obtained from health agencies. By engaging with data in a meaningful way, students become armed with the facts they need to decide once and for all: are the benefits of sport really worth the risk?

This is the selected topic for the 90-minute lesson developed by University staff and delivered by final-year Health Information Management students in the schools. Ultimately, the school students achieve the workshop aims of: ‘agreeing upon actions and carrying out an investigation; examining and utilising data when weighing up risks; and developing a proposal that justifies whether playing sport is worth the risk’ (La Trobe University 2012:7). Using creative problem solving skills, the Years 9 and 10 students reflect on their own personal experience of sport injury and examine statistical information on injuries sustained in a variety of sporting activities. These data are sourced from fact sheet publications based on data provided by HIMs in the course of their daily professional work: Smart Play - Sports Medicine Australia; Monash University Accident Research Centre; and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare – National Injury Surveillance Unit. By engaging with data in a meaningful way, the students find the facts they need to make an informed decision about whether the benefits of sport are really worth the risks. In addition to developing and applying basic statistical and problem-solving skills, the school students develop an understanding of the uses of health data, and the roles of HIMs in collecting, classifying, reporting and analysing clinical data on sports injuries.

HIM students’ roles

The Health Information Management students introduce the school students to enquiry-based learning (a methodology used in the Health Information Management courses and throughout the Faculty of Health Sciences). Our students perceive that a critical role is to engage the school students in their own education and to encourage and motivate them to learn and apply new research skills that they can later use at university. They also show the school students the academic, career and life pathways that are available to school students when they apply themselves and care about their education. The approach has been adapted slightly with each iteration, based on the strengths and weaknesses identified when delivering the sessions.

3 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare – National Injury Surveillance Unit, Research Centre for Injury Studies, Flinders University, South Australia http://www.nisu.flinders.edu.au/about.php
HIM students' contribution
The Health Information Management students contribute actively and directly to the Program, engaging with the high school students and enthusiastically promoting the opportunities provided by higher education and the health information management course. In close collaboration with the classroom teachers and the SPP Officer, they teach the school students valuable skills in research and the fundamental principles of enquiry-based learning. They contribute to the school students' learning and expectations by providing them with an insight into university life. HIMs are pivotal to the functionality and operations of the health industry; therefore, through these workshops, school students have the opportunity to gain insight into a career pathway that has rewarding future prospects.

How HIM students gain from the program
Multiple benefits are accruing from the SPP for the Years 9 and 10 students, and also for the HIM students. The latter all report that, at both personal and professional levels, they have gained confidence from their participation. Furthermore, they have gained valuable life skills and experience. Their interpersonal skills have been enhanced from working alongside a different profession namely teachers, and of course with the high school-aged students. They report having achieved a sense of self-assurance and pride in what the Health Information Management course, La Trobe University and higher education in general, have to offer. One student said: ‘Previously, I would never have imagined myself assuming a teaching role but the SPP has provided me with the necessary abilities to do so. The skills attained are something that I will carry through with me to my future working career.’

Conclusion
All three Health Information Management students report that they have developed a respect for the SPP, the affiliated schools and the school teachers for their collective perseverance and commitment in engaging high school students from lower socio-economic areas with their education, thereby affording them the same opportunities as those from more privileged backgrounds. The Health Information Management students value the opportunity to contribute to the Program, with one commenting: ‘I really do believe the SPP is a fantastic Government and University initiative and I was incredibly pleased to see students actively seek and take brochures for La Trobe, and the course, as they left.’

The SPP has facilitated more than the formal partnership between the University and the schools. At another level, it has enabled a positive and productive relationship between the University’s Future Students Centre and the Department of Health Information Management and some of its senior students. Ultimately, we believe that the outcome of more equitable access to Health Information Management professional education will benefit our profession and the wider healthcare industry. As the 2012 student facilitators graduate we will welcome another three students, from the 2013 final year cohort, to continue our involvement in the SPP.

References

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