




CHASING THE LEARNING CURVE: CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES OF ACADEMIC SUPPORT STAFF WHO WORK WITH INDIGENOUS TERTIARY STUDENTS IN OFF CAMPUS STUDY CENTRES IN REGIONAL SOUTH AUSTRALIA

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Off campus study centres have played a crucial role in providing supportive learning environments for Indigenous students in regional centres throughout South Australia for over two decades. Many of these students have achieved university access via special entry procedures; they are of mature age and have cultural, community and family commitments that make moving to city campuses difficult. While the students undertake their programs via flexible learning, each study centre is to some extent a microcosm of the distant metropolitan university.



Support staff work with students enrolled in an expanding range of programs to facilitate the development of academic and linguistic skills that pave the way towards independent learning. However, the learning environment itself is undergoing rapid and continuous change with increasing reliance on new technologies in teaching and access to learning resources. The challenges faced by off campus academic staff in keeping abreast of the new technologies while at the same time continuing to foster the development of students' academic skills in these dynamic circumstances are outlined. Strategies developed by staff are considered in terms of their intercultural context.


Key words: *Off campus study centres; Indigenous students; Learning challenges and strategies*

Preamble

Challenges and strategies are significant themes of education. In the context of this paper, their implications for the practices of academic staff who provide support services for Indigenous students in off campus study centres are considered in the light of the external study experiences of the students. In a rapidly changing learning environment such scrutiny is all the more necessary to ensure that practice keeps pace with student needs in order to maximise educational opportunities. The challenges for the students are undoubtedly greater and, where staff are non Indigenous, they can never presume to have 'walked in the shoes' of Indigenous students. However the journey alongside provides shared insights as we chase the learning curve.

Introduction

Increasing participation in tertiary education by Indigenous Australians has been statistically demonstrated since the late 1980s (Encel 2000) although recent figures point to a 15.2% national downturn (cited in AV-CC Media Release, 2001). For Indigenous students in regional South Australia, a significant tertiary study mode over the past two decades has been via flexible or distance delivery with support




provided in local off campus study centres. Approximately 20% of the Indigenous enrolment of the University of South Australia (UniSA) undertakes this form of external study (Lane 1998), the effectiveness of which is dependent on 'the quality of the learning environment and the level of support afforded to the students' (Clark nd, p. 1).

Multifaceted historical disadvantage in education has been incurred by Indigenous people and, it could be argued, continues to be perpetrated even when access is improved (Bourke 2000). However, the Aboriginal and Islander Support Unit (AISU, 1996), now a component of the College of Indigenous Education and Research, in accordance with the University of South Australia's Act of Establishment (1991) and Statement of Reconciliation aims to provide Indigenous access and equity in higher education. The AISU has a vital role in ensuring that Indigenous people firstly gain entry to UniSA programs and secondly, that they receive appropriate academic, social and cultural support via learning assistance and provision of resources. Such intervention strategies are intended to maximise successful outcomes, contributing to the improvement of Indigenous students' tertiary participation, retention and success rates. They complement other initiatives such as promotion of Indigenous research and more inclusive curricula (<http://www.unisa.edu.au/aisu/>, 2001). To some extent AISU support is both additional to and articulated with the wider learning support environment of the University (Hicks, Reid & George, 1999).

Factors Contributing to Academic Success


Indicators of academic success can include affective, cognitive, environmental and behavioural factors such as: prior knowledge including 'educational attitudes'; a range of relevant skills such as verbal aptitude leading to ability to function within the tertiary discourse; confidence; adaptability; resourcefulness; feelings of familiarity and comfort; commitment; engagement with learning and a determination to succeed (Ramsey Barker & Jones 1999; Archer, Cantwell & Bourke 1999). These factors influence individuals' abilities to 'construct knowledge and understanding' within the learning environment' (Latchem 1996, p. 3).

Indigenous students bring a wealth of skills, knowledge, life experience and determination to the learning environment (DiGregorio, Farrington & Page 2000).



However, it seems that 'cognitive, linguistic, cultural, social and economic barriers', exacerbated in the tertiary environment, compromise success for Indigenous students undertaking any form of higher education (McConnochie nd). Observed characteristics of the profile of Indigenous students and some associated tertiary study implications may include the following: (Encel 2000; Mills unpub; Tearle 2000).

- Indigenous students are more likely to gain admission through special entry and may not have attended secondary school or undertaken post secondary studies such as TAF.
- Many are of mature-age and are the first in their families to undertake higher education. At one study centre the ages of the 30 or so students range from 18 to 64 years with the majority aged over 30.
- The priority that can be placed on studies is often dependent on other life factors including family, community and cultural responsibilities sometimes requiring prolonged absences; significant chronic health problems and/or disability; financial difficulties, and employment commitments.
- Students may be unfamiliar with conventions and expectations of the tertiary discourse where Indigenous perspectives may be absent or under-represented in views of learning and knowledge. 'Discourses are partial and partitional and social difference is manifest in the diversity of discourses within particular social practices' (Fairclough unpub, np).
- Students whose home languages are non standard may have difficulty with skills such as academic reading, extrapolating meaning, critical literacy; interpreting assignment requirements, analysing concepts, and applying these in relevant ways to demonstrate knowledge using the standard language of the tertiary institution. Students' own language styles may not be valued, instead regarded as of low status, inadequate and incorrect (Eggington 1992). Nakata (cited in *The Age*, April 21, 2001) states that 'lack of English...closes off higher education...it denies access to information, the basis of the global economies.'
- Students, including school leavers, are less likely to have undertaken prior studies in courses providing background for business or nursing programs.




Difficulties can occur both in understanding specialised content and in necessary skills, for example understanding functions of cells or conversions required for drug calculations (Lemmey, L. 2001, pers. Comm. November 2).

- Science-oriented courses taught by distance education have been largely print-based with few opportunities for visual study aids or hands-on practical components. A Nursing tutor observed that students who are 'visual learners' are in need of resource materials to supplement their texts (Lemmey, L. 2001, pers. comm. November 2.)
- Students may never have experienced the assessment modes favoured by academics such as extended essays or exams. Exams, including closed book, multiple choice with a heavy emphasis on memorising, identifying and reproducing specialised information may pose particular difficulties, inhibiting students from demonstrating knowledge (Christensen & Lilley 1007).
- Indigenous, mature age students tend to begin studies with lower levels of computer and information technology (CIT) literacy including little or no experience of the Internet (Barraket et al 2000). They therefore need to develop these skills, including associated meta language, as part of their studies (Lear unpub.) while at the same time dealing with the unfamiliar demands of the tertiary learning environment.
- It is likely that many commencing students lack confidence in their own abilities and consider a failed assignment a total failure (Briege, U. 2001, pers. comm. October 31).

Motivation for Indigenous Students in Distance Education

Despite inhibiting factors, Indigenous students have many compelling reasons for undertaking higher education, with themes including education and personal development, security through future employment, a desire to contribute to their own or the wider community and role model consciousness (Ellis 1996; Degregorio, Farrington & Page 2000). However, choice of study mode for mature age students with localised responsibilities and who need vital family support throughout their studies is limited. Moving to the city to study is highly impracticable if not impossible,



and the external mode therefore offers the only university option since it fulfils the need to remain in home communities (Latchem 1996). While there are distinct advantages such as greater flexibility, especially of time management and location, some of the disadvantages of the external experience combine with aspects of students' individual circumstances to create additional challenges.

Study Programs Undertaken via Off Campus Centres

Historically, since their inception in the late 1970s the off campus centres, responding to pressing needs for Indigenous early childhood teachers in regional areas, provided support for Indigenous students enrolled in only one program – the Bachelor of Early Childhood Education and its precursors (Palmer & Ebbeck, 1990). From 1994, under the auspices of the former Faculty of Aboriginal & Islander Studies, support for an increased range of Programs for Indigenous people in these rural communities became available via the AISU. In addition, an increasingly diverse range of programs has become progressively available via flexible delivery. In 2001, students in the off campus centres are enrolled in 17 programs including undergraduate diplomas and degrees as well as a range of graduate programs up to and including masters studies.

Over-representation in the arts and humanities with a corresponding under-representation in areas such as health sciences, business and management has been common in Indigenous higher education (Bin Sallik 1993). However, a comparatively large cohort of students at the off campus centres is now enrolled in the Bachelor of Nursing, fully external since 1997. This suggests strong interest in nursing studies amongst Indigenous people, formerly thwarted by the need to move to a city campus. There are increasing enrolments in business or IT-oriented programs such as the Diploma of Business, the Bachelor of Commerce and the Bachelor of Computer and Information Science (Encel 2000). It seems that for regional Indigenous people, availability of these programs in the external mode encourages students to apply for them

The significant increase in the range and nature of the programs now being studied externally represents both a major change in the character of the centres as well as broadening the range of needs within the support environment.




Operation of the Off Campus Centres

The centres aim to provide, albeit on a smaller scale, facilities necessary for University study – local one-stop shops. While they have shared characteristics, each is highly individualised depending on the community in which it is located and the varying numbers, profiles and needs of the students. Flexibility and a ‘supportive environment where students feel comfortable and are able to obtain extra assistance without feeling intimidated’ (Bin Sallik 1996, p. 64) are vital. A fundamental aspect of the centres is perceived to be the welcoming, homelike atmosphere where there is a sense of ownership and pride, meeting social and cultural needs (Ellis, 1996; Lear unpub.). A student commented, ‘The study centre feels right’ (pers. comm. cited in Mills unpub, p. 5)

Trusting relationships and rapport with support staff are important especially for commencing students who have many new issues to address. Currently, across the centres, there is a mix of Indigenous and non Indigenous staff, and a key feature of the AISU Strategic Plan is the progressive implementation of the staff Indigenisation process.

In line with the AISU Home Base system of support, each centre has a fractional time Lecturer/Counsellor whose responsibilities include administration; academic and personal counselling; advocacy; monitoring and recording student progress; University-wide liaison; information dissemination; tutor liaison; provision of individual and/or group tutorials and workshops in areas of study requested by students; preparation and presentation of the annual Undergraduate Preparation for Indigenous Students (UPIS) Program; records maintenance; postgraduate mentoring; employment counselling; publicity; recruitment (<http://www.unisa.edu.au/aisu/>, 2001). Staff also provide outreach services, visiting students unable to attend the study centres, such as prisoners and housebound people.

The Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ATAS), a DETYA-funded scheme, provides a means for individualised tutorial assistance to address specific needs ‘over and above what the institution can provide in order to achieve an appropriate academic outcome’ (Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme, 2001). This tuition is



largely skills-focussed, complementary to teaching and leading towards independent learning, identified as a desirable outcome for both students and staff (McInnes and James 1995). Students also appreciate the ongoing personal support of their tutor(s) that is integrated into the learning experience.

Experience indicates that while students appreciate opportunities for peer support and social interaction within the study centres, when it comes to academic assistance, most prefer one to one, face to face support. This is due to the widely divergent knowledge and skills students bring to their studies and the range of personal circumstances and commitments that limit their study time. Sometimes community dynamics also influence the effectiveness of group sessions.

While tutorial assistance can be undertaken at any location (study centre; student's home; local library) mutually agreeable to both parties, the centres provide the main focus of the support services. Some offer 24 hour, seven days per week access to a range of student facilities and a place for quiet study where program materials can be stored. Computers with required software are provided by the AISU, an ongoing challenge in itself with budgetary considerations interacting with changing technology. The study centres also facilitate Internet access for university email and online teaching and learning resources, and each has a small library, telephone and teleconference facilities.

In addition, the centres provide a venue for study and non study interaction with other students and the wider community, both Indigenous and non Indigenous and are often accepted as local Indigenous organisations, being included in information and resource sharing such as consultative groups, community newsletters and functions such as Culture Week celebrations. Indigenous teaching and nursing students undertake practicum and clinical placements in local education and health venues, raising the profile of Indigenous perspectives within these fields. Thus each study centre takes on a recognised local identity while at the same time symbolising the distant university, geographically removed by hundreds of kilometres. These are important immediate and wider community links 'that should be nurtured and maintained to the benefit of all' (Ellis et al 2000, p 1).




Influences of Distance Education Characteristics on Students' Learning

Distance education, referred to variously as 'flexible delivery, 'external studies' or 'open learning' is intended to be learner-centred, affording students greater control over their learning while employing a range of delivery modes and increasingly sophisticated communications and information technologies (CIT) that supplement or replace conventional technologies such as print, audio, video and telephone (Clark 2000; Latchem 1996). For students to function effectively, CIT knowledge and expertise are no longer optional extras but essential for any study mode.

However, for external Indigenous students, personal factors already identified can compromise such control and in turn, characteristics of the external environment can result in further difficulties including:

- A sense of isolation and alienation from teaching staff where students can complete their programs without ever seeing their lecturers or visiting the metropolitan campus in which they are enrolled. Most programs undertaken, apart from Nursing, do not involve any on campus attendance (in any case difficult and expensive for students).
- In programs with small enrolments, a student may be the only one at a centre enrolled in a particular course, leading to lack of course-related peer support
- External Indigenous students are observed to be reticent in initiating and maintaining contact with unknown academics via any means including phone calls, teleconferences or email, preferring face to face contact. Institutional factors such as workload and casualisation of the academic workforce may inhibit opportunities for proactive lecturer contact or continuity of communication. Experience in implementing flexible options including CIT applications indicates that they are often not effective substitutes for face to face interaction (Barraket et al 2000, p.121). Students 'can only learn if they know somebody is there' (Walker 1998, np) and it could be added, if they know who is there and can relate to them.
- Print-based course materials are often daunting in the volume of reading as well as the need for integrating the requirements of the course information guides (including assignment interpretation) study guide, readers and textbooks. Since



academic readings are often written by professionals for other professionals and include assumed knowledge, jargon and unclear expression (Bouffler, 1991), it can appear to students that course compilers do not have realistic knowledge of being 'on the receiving end' of the materials.

- Computer and Information Technology (CIT) has the potential to address some of the disadvantages of distance education (Hicks, Reid and George 1999) leading to empowerment in areas such as research and communications (Bourke 2000). Productive use requires 'convenient and reliable access', appropriate application by students and academics as part of the broader learning design, and support by 'staff, systems, infrastructure and processes of the University' (Barraket et al 2002 p. xiii).
- When students lack expertise to access difficult and unreliable technology and skills to utilise both integrated and generic supports provided by a range of learning resources (Hicks, Reid & George 1999), they are excluded from these benefits. Observation at an off campus centre (Lear unpub) suggests that the majority of students are either unaware of, or resistant to, the University's online environment including email, student records, the library, online or CD materials and supports, unless staff are present to provide encouragement and hands-on assistance with access and procedures.
- CIT also requires students to learn additional literacies with associated language conventions and skills in order to participate effectively (Benfield 1999).
- Importantly, 'culturally inappropriate computing environments' may inhibit Indigenous students (Barraket et al 2000 p xiv) unless Indigenous community aspects are 'promoted, respected and incorporated into the learning and network initiatives' (Bourke 2000, p1). McLoughlin and Oliver (1999, p.1) advise that 'systematic attention must be given to particular design guidelines, which include cultural contextualisation'.




Challenges for Staff

For off campus staff, geographical distance from city campuses is sometimes professionally isolating although advantages shared with academics at rural campuses include close connections to immediate surroundings (Ellis et al, 2000). Fractional time employment limits availability at the study centres and with an emphasis on attending to immediate issues it can be difficult to identify and site the support role within the context of the wider tertiary environment.

Critical considerations for support staff surely lie in the notion of 'support' itself. What does it really mean? Whose interests does it serve? Could it reinforce and even perpetuate educational disadvantage, be counterproductive, fostering dependence and institutional hegemony rather than liberation and empowerment? Do support staff apply 'bandaid treatment' to address or even disguise other factors such as the negative effects of higher education cost cutting that might influence quality of teaching and course delivery? Can support practices be rationalised or subjected to scrutiny according to specific paradigms and do they need to be? Might for example, (academic) language development be underpinned by possible interpretations of a skills or genre focus, or assume other perspectives such as Critical Language Awareness? (Fairclough 2001) What are the implications of diminishing higher education funding on the cost effectiveness of current structures and practices? Support staff, sometimes using excuses such as 'I'm too busy attending to pressing needs of students' or "I don't feel like an academic out here', need to challenge their roles while remaining mindful of the need to be cautious about 'inflicting our certainties' on students (MacGinitie 1993, p 679).

Recent Planning Unit and AISU information indicates that Indigenous students within the profile outlined previously (that is, admitted to entry level programs via non standard entry or incomplete higher education studies, over a median age of 30 and studying externally) are at higher risk in terms of success, retention and completion rates. Leaving aside the possibly selective nature of criteria for success which might exclude indicators designating achievement in real terms for these students, as well as factors in the external environment that impact negatively on students such as alterations to Centrelink allowances, this is of concern to external Indigenous




students and communities. Further challenges across the university, including for external support staff, are raised.

Off campus staff are in a distinctive position to view the external study experience at least to some extent from the Indigenous students' perspectives, leading to shared understanding of issues and real, 'on the ground' responses. While their role is distinguished from teaching and research functions within the institution (Lane 1998), they operate across the academic and community discourses and to some extent are allocated the role of brokers between the university and the external learners. Specifically challenges might include:

- Continuing to provide and improve effective support in line with the criteria of the AISU to meet the identified needs of external Indigenous students within the changing learning environment. As well as addressing academic needs, issues such as bridging the isolation gap are very important.
- Addressing the acquisition of additional generic and course-specific skills required due to the expanding range of programs being undertaken.
- Developing additional strategies to empower students to access and utilise the CIT supports and essential information integrated into the (external) university learning environment and beyond.
- Expanding their own expertise through progressive re-skilling to keep pace with the changes to the wider learning environment while also challenging and informing their own practice. In particular, when access is difficult in regional areas and where staff do not have appropriate CIT skills and knowledge they can neither appreciate the role and practices of CIT for the students nor offer effective support within the online environment.

Strategies

As has been shown, the off campus study centres partially 'alleviate the sense of isolation for Indigenous students,' providing not only academic support but also social interaction (Lear unpub). To be effective, an overarching principle must be to continue respond to the needs that learners articulate and to modify support




practices accordingly. A wealth of collective experience indicates a resource that can be recorded, evaluated and revised with a view to continuously improving the unique nature of external support rationale and practice. Wherever possible, without inappropriate intrusions, student input can provide a clearer focus (Ramsey Barker & Jones, 1999). In turn, these evaluations can provide a resource to inform the wider university community of some of the issues for external Indigenous students. As Burke (2001, p.1) observed, 'Instead of deciding what is best for us ... ask us. And listen to what we are saying and why'

Support strategies are multifaceted and initially consist of those embedded in the operation of the AISU, including at the outset, providing information to assist students to make prudent choices from a widening range of Indigenous education providers. Selection processes for non standard entrants, as well as sound program and course counselling, aim to establish and affirm the reasons for study and avoid setting people up for failure (<http://www.unisa.edu.au/aisu/>, 2001)

The annual two week University Preparation for Indigenous Students (UPIS) Program, customised for all campuses and off campus centres, is planned in response to perceived student needs to 'give students an edge' before semester commencement. Organised to provide students with a non-threatening, practical introduction to the expectations of tertiary study, they include three main aspects:

- Academic familiarisation through study skills sessions covering aspects such as time and resource management, assignment analysis, planning and research strategies.
- CIT access, literacy and skills development, (a focussed and intensive approach is a critical requirement for the 2002 off campus programs)
- Knowledge of the support structures in the local area and on campus (<http://www.unisa.edu.au/aisu/> 2001).

These programs are subsequently evaluated and refined both in content and methodology. Student feedback confirms the value of these sessions in promoting initial confidence and independence (<http://www.unisa.edu.au/aisu/> 2001).




For off campus centres, arranging for all (commencing) students to come together for sessions is difficult and some additional and alternative orientation strategies need to be developed. These could include:

- Encouraging students to access the centre before semester commencement to allow time for individual sessions and practice. Students can also begin course work early.
- Greater use of visual material in each centre – posters showing essay structure; CIT procedures.
- Contact with on campus staff – study advisers; lecturers of First Year courses.

An initiative supported by the AISU Manager that assists in addressing isolation, is visits from on campus teaching staff. Students appreciate the opportunity to meet their lecturers on their own environment and find that course information and expectations are clarified. They are noticeably more likely to make subsequent telephone or email contact with lecturers met in this way. Another benefit is the awareness raising of teaching staff themselves who are better able to see the study experience from the students' perspectives.

Because of the preferred nature of support, the ongoing strategies are largely individualised and accommodating of specific needs, both academic and personal. Some students are adept at identifying their strengths and difficulties in knowledge, understanding and skills and also the amount of assistance they require (Ramsey, Barker & Jones 1999), while others discern this through experience. Thus individual tutorial sessions are usually student-driven and collaborative with a high level of interaction and discussion that incorporate statements where students identify their needs ('I don't understand this reading.' 'Can we talk about my essay plan?' 'How do I do the quotes and the bibliography?' 'I need to put these ideas in my own words.').

At any given time it might be possible to find learning sessions focussing on some or even many of the following: academic reading skills; familiarisation with specific writing genres; assignment conferencing; clarification of scientific concepts; critical literacy skills; expressing ideas and information in clear language; avoiding




plagiarism; computing skills; accessing information on the internet; use of generic supports such as study skills leaflets; editing skills; exam skills and more. Development of CIT skills has tended to be integrated into students' study activities rather than addressed separately, and involves both direct instruction and modelling by staff members, as well as trial and error by students, often assisted by peers or software supports such as the Help Menus.

Staff need to be understanding of students' circumstances as well as flexible and versatile, employing a range of responses which can vary from student to student. Some students request regular sessions while others are satisfied with a 'briefing', returning with an almost completed assignment for perhaps assistance with proof reading or referencing. The concept of student ownership is important in relation to both the processes and final products. As students develop metacognitive skills they have better understanding of their learning processes and are more proficient evaluators of the quality of their work.

Often, support strategies include affirming practices that already exist among students. Experience in the study centres indicates competence in peer support, where incidental, informal assistance is offered to others; for example: suggesting resources; discussing and clarifying print information and assignment topics; assisting with CIT access and expertise. If a student receives negative feedback or feels that personal factors are impacting heavily on their studies, there is usually someone who has had a similar experience who can commiserate and provide encouragement to continue. Dolan and Castley (1998) caution that while formalisation of peer mentoring sometimes camouflages institutional deficiencies such as inadequate teaching, it can also promote teamwork, creative problem-solving and effective communication and negotiation, all skills increasingly valued both educationally and in employment.

Confidence building is an important component of academic success, especially where students have had previous unsatisfactory educational experiences. Off campus centres provide many opportunities to share successes ranging from good assignment grades, successful teaching or clinical placements and graduation with peers and staff. Success is promoted and affirmed in other ways such as graduate




posters, articles in community newsletters and newspapers, and via the student section of the AISU website.

Scenarios identified below (and expanded, Appendix 1) taken at random and representative of only a small sample of a total range, provide examples of ways in which different aspects of support are apparent in the off campus environment. Taken singly they may appear simplistic; regarded in the learning context they may be progressive and cumulative.

- Responding to academic needs of learners
- Supporting student-peer initiatives
- Offering choices and pathways
- Responding to personal circumstances of learners
- Flexibility
- Fostering opportunities for student/community input to academic teaching staff
- Supporting integration of life experience with course content
- Facilitating support through group work
- Implementing staff initiatives
- Affirming positive study experiences

Conclusion

For external Indigenous students for whom isolation from the university can be more than geographical and who face additional barriers through personal circumstances and a legacy of educational disadvantage, off campus study centres can both localise and personalise the tertiary learning experience, while providing a means to expand their knowledge and develop required academic attitudes and skills. Isolation, together with rapid changes to the scope and nature of the increasingly



online learning environment, expands the challenges for all. Off campus support staff must be critical of their roles while responsive to student needs through both established and innovative practice.

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Appendix 1

Examples of Support Strategies for External Indigenous Students in Regional Off Campus Study Centres

Responses to varying academic needs of learners

A Nursing tutor, observing that Indigenous Human Bioscience students were not learning effectively from print materials in the external packages and set textbooks developed a set of 'flip charts' – Side A kidney; Side B parts of the kidney with diagram. Students can identify what they know then turn over to check.

Students found specialised terminology difficult to remember. Memory strategies were developed – afferent (sensory) vs. efferent (motor) pathways – 'a' comes before 'e' in the alphabet.

A student expressed dismay at the length of an essay – 2500 words. The staff member suggested making a plan of the structure and working on each section in turn. The student found the essay task manageable using this strategy.

Student-peer initiatives

A First Year Diploma student voluntarily documented her learning in an introductory Computing course in a notebook, over and above course requirements. She commented that this enabled her to readily refer to procedures and terminology when her tutor was not present so that she could work independently. Later she undertook, unaided, production of an Indigenous community newsletter. She stated she could not have done this without the knowledge and skills gained in the course.

A final year BA student provided both formal and informal CIT instruction for First Year Diploma students

Offering choices and pathways

A First Year student had missed some preliminary work because of illness and was so worried about a subsequent written exam that she said she would defer from the program. A staff member suggested that just experiencing what it is like to sit for an exam could be a good learning opportunity for the future even if she did not pass. When the staff member phoned later, the student had made full use of the exam time and felt positive about the outcome.



Flexibility

A student phoned to say he could not attend a pre-arranged tutorial session because he was needed to baby sit a relative's children. The tutor said 'I will need about 15 minutes notice, so when you know you will be free, just phone back and we'll make another time'.

Opportunities for student/community input to academic teaching staff

Students beginning a program newly offered in the external mode were concerned that a lecturer did not seem familiar with their preferred learning styles. They talked to the support staff member who invited the lecturer to visit the centre. A meeting was organised with present and past students as well as community members. Free discussion took place about factors and attitudes the students felt would help them most. Later, students commented that the lecturer was 'on their wavelength'

Integration of life experiences within course content

A student had extensive knowledge and experience of child development and behaviour based on observations of her own and relatives' children. In discussion with a tutor she contextualised this with information in a child development text, relating study tasks to life experience in course-relevant way.

Support through group work

A tutor organised several small group sessions for three second year nursing students revising for a clinical sciences exam over several weeks before the exam. As well as revising course content and undertaking practice exams, the students were able to share their concerns about and strategies for the forthcoming exam with their tutor and each other in a non threatening environment.

Staff initiatives implemented

In response to perceived lack of CIT skills by ATAS tutors, a series of practical workshops was developed and trialled by a tutor who implemented them on a voluntary basis. Tutors were given the opportunity to learn basic computing skills, word processing, use of other software and to access and use the Internet. These skills are essential to enable tutors and students to adapt to increasing use of CIT in the learning environment (Lear unpub).



Affirmation of positive study experiences

A student, invited to contribute to the AISU website, participated in an interview:

'University- it's a new world to me. It enlightened my life. I can understand things that I never understood before ... a lot of skills, it's really exciting. You can say, 'Look now, I know that there, I've been doing it all my life, but I never knew it. But when it is written up, you know how to manage it. It's something like managing your life and managing your future.'

(A. Wilson, interviewed by A. Baker and C. D'Angelo, Port Lincoln Study Centre, August 2000)
http://www.unisa.edu.au/aisu/aisu_new_web/Studentpage_.htm [accessed online 19/11/01]