



'Ask a Question': Student use and misuse of online academic skills support

Key Words

academic skills, online academic support, technology in higher education,

Abstract

The provision of online academic language and learning support is seldom researched despite a current move to disaggregate or unbundle university services (McFarlane, 2010; Wiley & Hilton, 2009). Current practice at SCU involves academic support via university in-house Academic Skills in the Centre for Teaching and Learning offering face-to-face and online academic support during business hours as well as an outsourced online tutoring service after hours to provide a complement of 'anywhere, anytime' (Geddes, 2004) academic support for busy students with family responsibilities, employment and those completing off-campus study. The SCU demographic comprises equity groups with higher percentages than the sector averages (McAuley, 2016). The project aimed to investigate the 'Ask a Question' email review service provided by Academic Skills with a view to improve the service through a better understanding of the types of questions students ask, the ways students use the university's online academic language and learning support as well as the ways students misuse online academic support. Academic Skills staff were surveyed regarding the challenges encountered in responding to online student questions and the provision of digitised academic support. 'Ask a Question' is mainly used for assignment reviews and managed by Academic Skills staff in the Centre for Teaching and Learning. Students upload files such as an assignment draft, the assessment task and marking criteria for review and feedback within 72 hours. A corpus analysis (Anthony, 2016) of 600 student questions in Session 1 and 2 2016 revealed ten categories of student queries in addition to the frequencies of these questions. Academic Skills staff responded to a short survey on the challenges of meeting the needs of online learning support for a diverse student demographic. The study findings revealed that students most desired general feedback and reassurance about being on track for an assessment and secondly, referencing assistance. Staff identified time constraints as a key challenge and responding to unrealistic expectations and repeat requests for assistance from some students as typical examples of misuse. One unanticipated finding revealed some student dissatisfaction with generic feedback from the outsourced after-hours online tutoring service and consequently returned to Academic Skills for in-depth comprehensive unit-based feedback which the students considered more helpful. Further research needs to clarify the feedback differences between generic outsourced online services and in-house unit-based online academic support services provided for students. Recommendations include extending staff/student consultation time, limiting repeat appointment availability and clearer marketing and differentiation of the academic support services provided as well as the complementarities to support productive and purposeful learning.

References

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