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Academic skills and beyond: A resource based approach to support student success in higher education

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An increasingly diverse range of students are entering higher education, bringing with them a vast range of experiences, skills and pre-existing knowledge. However, approaches to increasing student participation (and therefore success) to date have focused on strategies aimed at supporting non-traditional students to "fit in", rather than changing existing structures to accommodate their needs. This paper will outline a resource-based approach to student success, which capitalises on the resources and capacities existing within the student, within their performance of the student role and within the environment that surrounds their learning.

This paper will report on a study and propose a resource based approach to student success. Three main sites or domains are identified as a focus of this approach – intrapersonal resources, skills resources and environmental resources. These domains interact with each other to support student success, and three potential methods for implementing a resource based approach are highlighted in the spaces where they intersect. Pedagogical design, mapping and matching, and learning support all have a role in enabling both students and universities to make the most of their existing resources and develop new ones.

Key Words: student success, diversity, resource based approach.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, a movement for widening participation in higher education has emerged in many western countries including Australia, the United States and across Europe (Oriel, 2011). As a result, students are entering degree courses from increasingly diverse backgrounds and with varied needs. There are in fact two forms of diversification occurring – social diversity and skills diversity (Dillon, 2007) – and they do not necessarily correlate. It can no longer be assumed that a student entering higher education has served an academic apprenticeship through the traditional pathways of secondary or TAFE education.

Despite this, approaches to increasing participation to date have focused on strategies aimed at supporting students who do not traditionally enter higher education, rather than changing existing structures to include them (Gale & Tranter, 2011). Students are generally required to fit in with existing epistemologies, organisational structures, cultures and practices. They are expected to assimilate into the role of student as defined by the university. A "deficit" model had become prevalent as a result (Lawrence, 2002), where students who resist or find assimilation difficult are subject to remedial interventions around academic or study skills. Such deficit models do not recognise alternative epistemologies and cultures which may influence the definition of what constitutes "skill". Nor do they consider the personal resources students bring from their unique backgrounds. As such, university can become alienating for students who possess diverse worldviews and epistemologies.

Academic or study skills are traditionally seen as those skills required to successfully participate in and complete an educational course. Possessing these skills is often cited as being crucial for the retention and participation of undergraduate students (Fergy, Heatley, Morgan, & Hodgson, 2008; Hafford-Letchfield, 2007), and there is growing recognition that tertiary students need support in gaining the specific academic skills required for higher education (Kimmins & Stagg, 2009). In recognition of their importance in assisting students adjust to the "university" way of learning, most universities have study skills support services, and many also offer specific workshops and lectures as students transition into their courses (Alter & Adkins, 2001; Brunhofer, Weisz, Black, & Bowers, 2009).

A project called "A framework for academic skills progression: Transition pedagogy in social work" has been undertaken at an Australian university for the past twelve months. While focusing on the traditional notion of academic skills as the performance of tasks such as reading, writing and citation, the project has identified that this is a fairly limited view of what students need to successfully participate and succeed in higher education. It is contended that to focus exclusively on these skills is to take a narrow and fragmented view, and such initiatives are likely to offer only partial support at best.

This paper will outline a resource based approach to student success developed through this project. The approach focuses on resources and capacities existing within the student, within their performance of the student role and within the environment which surrounds their learning. Following background information about the project, this paper will provide an overview of this perspective on student success, which proposes a more holistic approach to supporting students achieve their potential. Further details about three domains / sites of resources will be provided, including the role that universities play in provision and support. Finally, recommendations for the implementation of this approach will be suggested.

2. Background

The project, "A framework for academic skills progression: Transition pedagogy in social work", was inspired by a growing awareness among teaching staff that existing means of supporting the academic success of social work students were not optimal. Indeed, Alter and Adkins (2001) stated they had "wide-ranging concerns about the academic ability of social work students" entering professional education (p. 493). The need for greater explicitness in the identification of required skills, and commitment to a scaffolded and embedded approach became guiding principles early in the project, based on preliminary research and the professional experience of the project group.

The overall aim of the project was to develop a framework that embedded development of discipline specific academic skills to guide curriculum design, teaching and learning in each year of an undergraduate social work program. The framework was designed to function alongside the Australian Education and Accreditation Standards (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2010), thereby supporting students' transitions into university, throughout their course and into practice. The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) has been working over the past decade to formalise the minimum practice standards expected in the profession. These were first published in 2003 and revised in 2010 (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2003, 2010), and while they are subject to ongoing revision, these standards document the Association's expectations of social work education delivery. The project reported in this article was approved by the University Human Ethics Advisory Group in the Faculty of Health.

3. Project method

A mixed methods approach was adopted for this project, beginning with a comprehensive literature review of current research to establish what was already known in the area and gaps in existing knowledge. Published works related to academic or study skills that were identified as having particular relevance to or emphasis for social work students in the context of transition pedagogy were reviewed. The two main themes discovered in this literature were the widening of participation for "non-traditional" social work students, and a need for improvement in retention.

Information synthesised during this literature review guided the second phase of the project, when data was collected from both first year social work students and social work educators. Two methods were used to collect and analyse this data – surveys (using both quantitative and qualitative questions) and qualitative interviews. As no pre-existing surveys were available that met the project's needs, surveys were designed to address the research topic. Quantitative data was analysed using a combination of descriptive and inductive statistical analyses, while the qualitative data was analysed using Strauss and Corbin's (1990) process of indicative thematic coding. A response rate of 33% from a cohort of n = 152 students was achieved, the majority of respondents were female (86%) and the average age was 30.54 (SD 10.14, Range 18-50). Some students (17.9%) came from postcodes denoted as low socio-economic areas by the POA Index of Education and Occupation, and most entered via mature aged entry (45.5%) and TAFE (34.1%). A substantial number identified as being first in family to attend university (36.4%), and 18.2% identified themselves as having a disability. Thirty one surveys were received from academics, and five academics were interviewed. The majority of academic respondents were also female (90.30%), and the average age was 50.54 (SD 8.44, Range 30-62). Academic and student participation was considered crucial to the success of the project, as any outcomes needed to be relevant to their experience of tertiary education in this area.

After this second phase, a draft framework was developed and the final phase of consultation was undertaken by presenting it for feedback at a Social Inclusion Conference workshop, a Teaching and Learning Conference and an Academic Literacies Symposium. Feedback included that the approach needed to be more flexible to the variety of contexts in which it could be used. The resulting framework was not developed to be a prescriptive rubric, but rather a set of guidelines to enable course teams to discuss and clarify academic skill expectations and map the curriculum across their degree. From here, teaching teams could scaffold academic skill development and make expectations explicit to students through embedding them into the curriculum, as opposed to students learning them through separate services or through trial and error.

While the following approach was developed from this discipline specific project, its features are transdisciplinary and arguably equally applicable to any area of study. Examples from social work will be used to illustrate the following discussion, but should be considered only as suggested ways to adopt this approach. Any student entering higher education will possess and be surrounded by a range of resources, and the key question is how to use them most effectively.

4. A resource based approach to student success

The resource based approach eschews institutional models that adopt a deficit view by creating often implicitly remedial approaches for particular groups of students who are thought to be at risk of dropping out or not achieving their potential. It also rejects the notion of acculturating students into the "right" way of studying and succeeding at university. This approach emphasises adopting an individualised approach that acknowledges the unique set of resources inherent in each student, and their interaction with the culture and practices of higher education. Building on Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development, the resource based approach views student development and success as being created in the space between what students can do for themselves and the support they are provided with to assist them to go beyond previous achievement levels and develop even further (Rose, Lui-Chivizhe, McKnight, & Smith 2003; Van Der Stuyf, 2002).

A thematic analysis of all project data undertaken in the final stages of evaluation and dissemination identified three main sites / domains in which resources exist. They are located within the individual (intrapersonal resources), within the skills of the academic activities (skills resources), and within the environment (environmental resources). Resources in these three categories combine to determine students' success in the social work course. Each of these categories will now be discussed.

4.1. Intrapersonal resources

Intrapersonal resources are those personal qualities, values and characteristics which students have usually formed before they enter higher education. While not traditionally thought of as "academic skills", several of these features were identified by both social work students and academics. When asked which academic skills they felt were needed to succeed in the social work course, students identified a total of 33 skills from a total of 138 responses, while the academics identified a total of 29 skills from a total of 131 responses. Personal qualities, values and characteristics comprised 19.1% of all academic skills identified by both groups. Students identified a higher proportion of qualities, values or characteristics (32.0%) than academic respondents (7.7%), indicating perhaps a slightly different perception of what is meant by the term "academic skills". Interestingly the only quality, value or characteristic cited by both groups was determination. The others qualities, values and characteristics identified by both students and academics were commitment, enjoyment, empathy, flexibility, patience, purpose and a willingness to learn.

The concept of self-determination as a source of motivation has been the subject of research in regard to student success in higher education (Volkening, Ostermann, Link, & Hubner, 2010), however the respondents in this project also used the term in the sense of persistence or resoluteness. A qualitative case study of working class students in the United Kingdom (Morrison, 2010) identifies this sense of determination as one of its key recurring themes, although the author acknowledges this quality in itself is not sufficient to overcome the barriers and challenges faced by these students in the current higher education environment. Another study from the United Kingdom discusses the determination required by young Pakistani and Bangladeshi women to move into and remain in education and employment (Dale, Shaheen, Kalra, & Fieldhouse, 2002).

Moriarty and Murray (2007) highlight that social work has been a field that has embraced recruitment of non-traditional students in recent years, which is unsurprising given its congruence with the profession's underlying philosophies. Indeed, they quote a guideline from the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) which recommends that social work student cohorts should reflect the demographics of the local community, and that due recognition must be given to minority groups that are under-represented and under-served. The emphasis on determination in this project may therefore be a specific characteristic of the profession within which the project was conducted. However, that does not explain the emergence of the other qualities identified by participants.

4.2. Skills resources

Skills resources are deeper qualities than the skills themselves. They relate to values, to habits of mind and action, and to the support around the student and how the student chooses to use that support. Therefore they can be defined as the abilities required to perform those tasks identified as academic skills, and the resources available to hone that performance. Academic skills are those proficiencies which are required to successfully complete a course of education. They differ from graduate and employability skills in that they do not necessarily relate to the future career of the student once they complete their university study. These skills have long been a feature of discussions around student success, but their relationship to that success has not always been clear.

Academic skills are now recognised to be contextual, and dependent on cultural and social norms (Goldingay et al., 2011; Lea, 2004). Academic skills are not simply a cluster of generic activities undertaken by students, across all disciplines. This differentiation and disciplinary context is particularly true in professional practice degrees such as social work, where the values and requirements of the discipline shape what skills are considered important. The contextualisation of skills within a disciplinary and professional practice context provides students with learning opportunities that are more relevant to expected graduate attributes. This assists them reach their goal of competent professional practice and hence meet their needs more successfully.

Therefore, in order to embed academic skills into their curricula, course leaders in each discipline need to be aware of the type and variety of academic skills they want their students to develop. Over thirty different social work specific academic skills were identified in the initial literature review for this project, but both students and academics subsequently identified seven skills which they perceived as being of particular importance – academic writing (essays / assignments), time management / organisation, research skills, note taking / attending to lectures, referencing, critical analysis and verbal / non-verbal communication.

Despite a large degree of agreement between the students and academics about which academic skills were important in social work, expectations around which skills to focus on and standards of performance were consistently highlighted by both students and academics as problematic. The social work students interviewed for this project reported that they initially felt uncertain of the expectations for academic skills, and had to "learn" them during their initial weeks at university over and above content knowledge, and without clear guidance. Many participants expressed appreciation when clear statements of expectations were provided, as this then ensured they felt comfortable that they were "on the right track". As stated by one student, "It would be useful to see things as list … some sort of priority order … like okay these are the things you need to learn … literacy and grammar … construction and research skills, and these will be the priority areas" (Student Interview 2, p. 3, paragraph 7).

A number of assumptions and expectations were identified by students which were not generally experienced as being inherent and not explicitly stated to them at the beginning of their studies. The main perception students held regarding the expectations of the university was that they had to work far more independently than in other settings, and that there were specific areas that the university saw as a priority. The students themselves recognised that they entered higher education with some assumptions and expectations which had been met to differing degrees. A common assumption was that they would be receiving more individual support and attention than they did, which is in direct contrast to the University's emphasis on independent learning.

These findings support a study by Hafford-Letchfield (2007) that utilized qualitative interviews with social work students to investigate retention issues in a bachelor level course. The study found that a "skills deficit" approach which focused on the acquisition of specific skills was less likely to succeed than a personal and professional development approach with flexible assessment methods. Hafford-Letchfield asserts that, in order to avoid stigmatisation, institutions should recognise that all students may require study support. Further, the project

findings support the adoption of adult learning principles to encourage students to participate in learning opportunities such as peer mentoring.

4.3. Environmental resources

Environmental resources are the factors external to students that influence their ability to succeed in higher education. These can include social relationships, objects and tools, the physical environment and institutional contexts. Both positive and negative aspects of social relationships were identified by the social work students in this project, however far more negative impacts on study were nominated. Some participants felt having a "life outside of university" was crucial to their success, while others characterised their social life as a distraction from their studies. The type of social relationships that students form also appears to be influential, as Facebook users for example have been found to have lower overall grades and spend less time studying (Kirschner & Karpinski, 2010).

Students in this study also cited a lack of physical resources in the form of finances, objects and tools as a barrier to academic progression. Many of the students work significant hours of part time employment in addition to their studying. This is consistent with findings by others for Australian undergraduates (Bradley, 2006). While the purpose of this work is financial support, several reported still feeling under financial constraint due to the effects of their education costs. These costs include visible objects and tools such as computers, textbooks and stationery, and less tangible resources such as internet access and transport.

The physical environment in which students are expected to learn also significantly influences their ability to succeed in higher education. Those studying on campus must orient and adapt to many different physical settings, some of which are more conducive to student success than others (Matthews, Andrews, & Adams, 2011). Students in this study particularly highlighted their difficulties in learning in large, noisy lecture halls, which are designed for a one way flow of information from lecturer to student and preclude other more participatory or collaborative approaches (Ogilvie, 2008). The lack of universal design or design that is accessible for all (McGuire, Scott, & Shaw, 2006) in many higher education settings makes physical environments an issue for all students, not just those with physical disabilities or mobility issues. Online environments also present challenges for those who do not have ready access to broadband internet, are not familiar or comfortable with online environments, or require more interpersonal interaction in order to learn. However, participants in this project indicated they found online learning environments particularly useful in supporting their engagement and learning, especially when using it as a forum to ask specific questions and seek advice.

Most universities offer a range of services and support for students to assist them successfully engage in tertiary learning. Common examples include study / academic skills units, library and information services, student welfare, careers and employment services and limited financial assistance. However, several issues with accessing these services have been identified in both this project and other research. In the current study, participants indicated they were not aware of the function of these services, and the only opportunity they had to find out about them was during orientation, when a vast amount of information is delivered and students are unsure what to focus on and absorb (Goldingay et al., 2011). Students also indicated a sense that using these services entailed "extra hassle" which they felt confusing on top of all the other adjustments they were making for university (Goldingay et al.). As stated by one participant, "I don't know it's probably just me … at times I might feel embarrassed about doing it, going in there and getting help" (Student Interview 4, p. 4, paragraph 1). A reluctance to engage with these services, for fear of being stigmatised or singled out, has also been identified in other studies (Hafford-Letchfield, 2007).

Culture and practices are another element students bring to the environment which can serve as a resource or barrier for students. Devlin (2011) identifies that many students who come from lower socio-economic areas are not familiar with academic culture, discourses and practices –

for example, the terms used and their meanings – which makes the adjustment to university life more difficult. Building on the work of Bourdieu and Margolis, Devlin suggests that students from higher socio-economic areas and others who traditionally attend university are familiar with the "particular types of knowledge, ways of speaking, styles, meanings, dispositions and worldviews" (Margolis, 2001, as cited in Devlin, p. 2). Part of this difficulty refers to the 'discourses of university' (Lawrence, 2005, as cited in Devlin, p. 3). Therefore, to enable students to master this aspect of the environment and understand unspoken requirements, it is important to move beyond identifying the student or the institution as the problem, and work towards a "two-way process of change and development" (Bamber & Tett, as cited in Devlin, p. 7). This means that the university and the students are encouraged to "understand the value of the discourse or code they already possess, as well as to understand the value of the alternate one" (Priest, as cited in Devlin, p. 7). In this way the environment becomes one where different epistemologies are acknowledged and accepted and students are more likely to feel valued and connected to the learning environment. This concept has also been used in the framework developed by the project team (Hosken et al., 2011).

5. Putting a resource based approach into action

Taking a resource based approach to student success in higher education requires a comprehensive and integrated approach, involving a range of stakeholders. Figure 1 illustrates this approach by highlighting the areas that need to be considered, and the inter-relationships between them. The following brief examples will examine how a resource based approach can be implemented, focusing on those areas requiring an integrated approach. The approaches suggested to achieve this are not intended to be prescriptive, and educational organisations are encouraged to develop their own approaches which meet their particular needs.

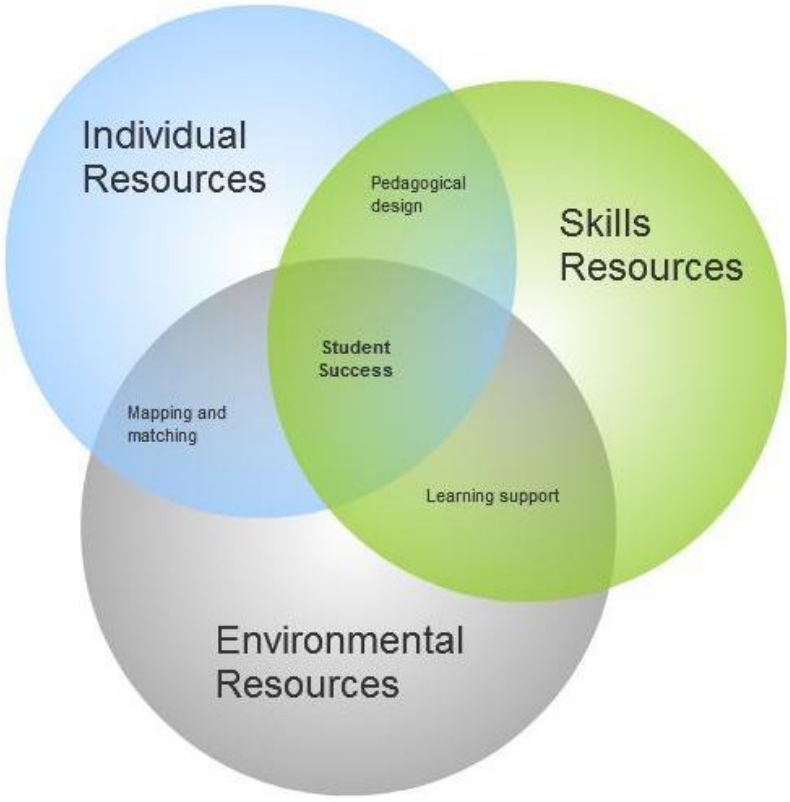

Figure 1. A resource based approach to student success**.**

5.1. Pedagogical Design

The area where individual and skills resources meet occupies a space where a Academic skills combine with a students' personal qualities, values and characteristics to form the intrapersonal factors influencing their success. Students contribute their unique learning abilities to the University, and this enriches the learning of not only their peers but also the academic community as a whole.

The adoption of particular pedagogical practices can enable students to make the most of their existing resource and develop new ones. One example of this is scaffolding used to meet each students' unique needs for development (Liechty, Schull, & Liao, 2009). Scaffolding is a process which involves the teacher providing support which ultimately enables learners to attain a much higher level than is possible on their own (Rose et al., 2003). While this is not a new approach to teaching and learning, there are often challenges to its implementation in settings where students are exposed to a range of tutors and perspectives (Parry & Reynolds, 2010). Consistency is recognised as a crucial requirement for successful scaffolding, suggesting academic staff within a course or faculty need to work together to provide a framework that supports students to develop both their individual and skills resources throughout their journey in higher education.

The aim of the current study is to achieve that for the discipline of social work, building a progression which explicitly recognises and values both skills and diversity for students, and encourages the use of scaffolding in support of their successful participation (Dillon, 2007; Goldingay et al., 2011). Such a progression was developed for the practice skill of reflexivity by the researchers, which defined the levels of competence expected of students at three checkpoints during their undergraduate studies. While the baseline and capstone levels of competence were fixed, the progression acknowledged the organic way in which these skills tend to develop by depicting the checkpoint in between as a range of possibilities. The development of a framework for developing these progressions by the student, also aimed to support academic staff to work together to explore their own expectations in relation to skills and performance required of students, and to embed these skills into the curriculum across degree courses. Please see Figure 2 for the outline of this progression, from the baseline first year at the top through to the capstone fourth year at the bottom.

5.2. Resource and needs analysis

Students' resources and their environment constitute the factors influencing student success. Students come to university with pre-existing social relationships, objects, tools and discourses (for example books, computer equipment, bags, financial resources, and ways of communicating, thinking, and creating knowledge) with which they contribute to the physical and cultural environment of the university. The extent to which these personal and environmental factors enable or disable student success can only be determined through an individualised profile, and this can only emerge by assessing the resources and needs of each student in relation to those provided by the university.

These resource and needs analyses could take a number of forms. On an individual basis, students could be asked to reflect on and self assess their personal skills and the environmental resources available to them. If properly integrated with existing online material from the educational organisation, they could then generate a personalised development plan which would include information on the most appropriate services and resources the university can provide for them. If these assessments were completed on a regular basis (e.g. every learning period) and were embedded within the curriculum and support services, they would provide students with an individualised support package which would maximise their ability to successfully engage in higher education. Ideally these assessment and skill development packages would be tailored to each course to ensure the students were receiving the information most relevant to their particular learning needs. While some resources (such as the Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory – Crick, Broadfoot, & Claxton, 2004) already exist, such approaches would need to be well resourced and supported by the institution if they were to succeed.

An alternative approach is to conduct this resource and needs analysis from an institutional perspective. These needs assessments would examine the services, environment and culture the university offers students to inform ongoing service and policy planning. Kift (2009) also advocates a whole of institution approach to responding to the widening participation agenda. Without a holistic approach that examines the institutional facilitators and barriers to student success, initiatives that promote and value the resources of student will undoubtedly fail. As identified earlier, the environment is constituted by physical and cultural social or discursive factors. The way disciplines construct their students' learning impacts on the way they are valued and supported and how the knowledge and skill they bring is valued.

Figure 2. Reflectivity / Reflexivity (Leading from baseline down to capstone year)

5.3. Learning support

The interaction between skills and environment form the factors influencing success. Students come to university with some academic skills but these have generally been developed in other educational settings and do not take into account the unique learning culture of higher education. The degree to which their skills resources match those required by the environment may only become apparent after some time, as students either do or do not develop and access sufficient resources to successfully fulfil the role of university student.

This is the area in which traditional methods of supporting students develop academic skills (i.e. study skills training) can make the best contribution, as they harness the environmental resources of the university to support and develop students' existing skills resources. However, considerable barriers continue to exist to students accessing specialist and other similar "stand-alone" academic support initiatives that are predominant in the current model. These include logistical issues such as time and work-life balance (May, Hodgson, & Marks-Maran, 2005), student self-identification of support needs, and stigma associated with accessing additional support. A model of separate academic skills support services conveys a message to students that these services are optional (Gunn, Hearne, & Sibthorpe, 2011), and so makes inherent assumptions that students will choose to, and are able to, access these services, and will do so when they identify a need for academic skill development. Kimmins and Stagg (2009) contend that initiatives to develop academic skills that are implemented independently of the curriculum concords with a "deficit" model of student learning, and may prevent students from accessing support due to stigma associated with such a perception of deficit. All of these issues would need to be acknowledged and addressed if these traditional methods can transition into a resource based approach.

6. Conclusion

This article has argued for a resource based approach to support student success in higher education within the context of the current widening participation agenda. This approach considers the resources students bring with them into the university environment, including those not traditionally thought of as academic skills, and those worldviews which may not constitute dominant discourses within academia. This approach is proposed as it values and supports student diversity, rather than characterising the range of students' skill levels in deficit terms. It also values the institutional context and considers how the university may be supported to respond to and harness student diversity.

Given the intensely contextual nature of academic skills, the examples of its application have been kept purposefully brief. The major outcome of the project on which this approach is based has been the development of the Multidimensional Framework for Embedded Academic Skill Development (Goldingay et al., 2011). The development of this framework will enable course teams to establish frameworks to support students' transition into, through and from their program. This framework provides a template that can be adaptedand contextualised to cultural and social norms of a discipline or profession. A further phase of the project is to gather case studies from educators and institutions using the resource based approach to support student success.

Student success in higher education is not simply a matter of developing the minimum skills required to get a "pass" rather than "fail". If learning acquired in a university setting is to be usefully applied post graduation, students need to develop the resources that will enable them to engage in life-long learning and adapt their knowledge and skills resources to changes in the workplace. Identifying, supporting and developing the unique set of resources each student brings to their university experience helps to integrate their personal aspirations and senses of meaning with the needs of their eventual employers and the broader community. Focusing on the development of only those skills that the university requires students to attain for its own purposes cannot meet this challenge, and potentially overlooks an untapped source of riches which could benefit students, the university and the wider community.

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