Humanising Higher Education: Cultivating Academic Success through Positive, Student-centred Experiences to Enhance Confidence and Independent Learning

David J. Sotir[1]

Abstract

The Higher Education Language and Presentation Support Centre (HELPS) at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) has created a paradigm shift by 'humanising' university education through holistically supporting students to improve their confidence, academic literacy, engagement and success. It has developed customised teaching and learning resources, programmes and services that reflect a command of the field while implementing evaluation practices leading to improvements in higher education amongst a 40,000+ student population. HELPS' distinctive 'No Wrong Door' approach guarantees no student is turned away. By conducting 'warm' referrals, students with issues relating to language, literacy and counselling are guided through pathways to seamlessly and effectively accommodate their needs.

Underpinned by sound pedagogical theory, HELPS promotes confidence and a sense of belonging within the respective communities of practice, facilitating successful transition into university, along the learning continuum and beyond graduation. Through harnessing the power of volunteering programmes it also connects students, staff, alumni and community members using a peer-voiced, 'insider approach'. Integration of a peer-assisted study success programme and a cross-promotional, cohesive strategy has bolstered participation in peer-to-peer learning support sessions.

This paper will discuss and share the ideas that have guided HELPS to consolidate its position within the higher education sphere as a centre of best practice, providing positive learning experiences that enhance student literacy, confidence and academic success.

Keywords: student-centred experiences, academic literacy, independent learning

1. Context and Approach

HELPS provides unique English language and academic literacy support services and programmes for both undergraduate and postgraduate coursework students. It was established in 2012 to increase the reach in helping more students whilst being financially manageable and student-focused. As a leader in the university sector, it has promoted its distinctive features of immediate accessibility, comprehensive programme content and face-to-face consultations in an increasingly technological environment. The continual growth in usage has been dramatic with over 15,000 individual students having accessed HELPS' programmes by the end of 2016. The HELPS model is based on a 'no wrong door' approach whereby students can immediately source assistance from the first point of contact without the need for an appointment. By conducting 'warm' referrals, students with concerns relating to language, literacy and counselling issues are guided through referral pathways to seamlessly and effectively accommodate their needs.

Receiving empathic guidance without the fear of judgement or assessment, and the opportunity to access a suite of programmes, students develop confidence in their approach to academic studies thus fostering independent learning. HELPS' all-inclusive ethos is underpinned by offering structured and centralised support for students, as well as its sense of community, the creation of welcoming spaces for students, a unique support network, high volunteer numbers, and the embedding of its services and programmes within the entire UTS organisation.

2. Student-focused Support

Proactively adhering to its mission, HELPS aims to deliver programmes and services that are carefully considered, co-ordinated and complementary (see Appendix 1). It has successfully established a centrally located unit together with outreach services strategically situated across campus (including

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[1]   University of Technology Sydney, Australia

the UTS Library) where students have expressed the need to utilise such support services. In addition, HELPS' flexible, scalable and responsive operational model has allowed it to cater to student demand during peak periods throughout the academic calendar. HELPS offers students numerous opportunities to meet face-to-face with an informed HELPS Advisor to seek reassurance that they are 'on-track', ensuring that students are producing academically acceptable work whilst at the same time strengthening their agency and resilience.

3. Theoretically Informed Practice

HELPS adheres to a developmental model of learning [1] rather than operating on a deficit approach. Guided by Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development [2], scaffolding techniques are utilised to teach all four macro skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking in order to minimise the distance between students' ability to perform a task under guidance and their ability to perform a task independently. This increases students' confidence, empowering them with an independence that will equip them for their entire learning journey and beyond. Through demonstration of the process of academic literacy, students learn to unpack, critique, review and reflect upon academic writing in English. Scaffolded writing techniques are maximised, reflection on students' own experiences is encouraged and skills to develop academic, social and professional practice are promoted to maximise student success. In line with co-constructivism, communities of practice are woven into HELPS' ethos and its programmes. These communities of practice are 'groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly' [3]. HELPS fosters and establishes communities of practice amongst its students to encourage collective, experiential and interactive learning that is deep and meaningful.

4. Curricula and Resources

To complement the face-to-face service provided, HELPS has produced its own suite of online resources and materials in direct response to students' needs. HELPS recognises and appreciates the value and potential of online education. A blended learning approach is offered through the deployment of multimedia resources and face-to-face contact to achieve ideal learning outcomes that reinforce graduate attributes. In addition to targeting the four macro skills, there is also a focus on the development of students' critical thinking and analytical skills which are considered essential in higher education. Online resources include videos, screencasts, fact sheets, sample written assignments, pronunciation models, quizzes and tutorials. HELPS follows a philosophy that promotes the open sharing of resources (see Appendix 2).

HELPS has produced a number of annotated sample written assignments, unique to the University, which highlight key structural components of authentic, exemplary pieces of writing. The samples are discipline-specific and demonstrate a varied range of writing genres. These have been embraced by faculties, which has enhanced the breadth of their impact (see Appendix 3). From 2015-2017, in response to student feedback, HELPS' redeveloped an online *Avoiding Plagiarism Tutorial and Quiz* which is institutionally recognised and assists academics in the teaching of ethical practice. This has proven to be an indispensable tool in helping to raise student consciousness toward academic integrity.

5. Enhancing Confidence towards Independent Learning

HELPS has always recognised the fundamental role that confidence plays in students' realisation of their fullest potential. It appreciates the importance of instilling a sense of belonging to promote students' self-belief which has been demonstrated to be closely linked to motivation [4]. When students are able to self-regulate their learning, they have a better understanding of their learning approach and can maximise their learning in the most efficient ways [5]. They are motivated to take responsibility and are able to work with others to enhance the depth and breadth of their learning. With compelling Australian empirical evidence identifying early intervention as pivotal in the prevention of a decline in university student psychological well-being there is an ethical imperative to act. Teaching independent learning skills, particularly in the first year of tertiary studies, is a strategy which contributes positively to student mental health and its validity is substantiated by Self-Determination Theory from the field of positive psychology [6].

6. Inclusivity and Diversity

HELPS strives to promote an inclusive and varied learning environment. Its ESL-trained staff members are knowledgeable regarding students' ranging levels of competency from undergraduate

through to postgraduate, Non English-speaking Background (NESB) and English-speaking Background (ESB) learners, first-year students transitioning from high school to university, mature age and pathway students, as well as those with special needs. HELPS endeavours to include disadvantaged students and reduce bureaucratic barriers in order to afford equality, social justice and care to as many students as possible.

HELPS comprises internationally focused staff who can prepare students for global citizenship in an increasingly borderless world. Staff demonstrate an awareness and understanding of the differences in Australian and overseas educational systems and the impact that this can have on students' approaches to learning. As international students are often accustomed to different styles of teaching, learning and assessment types, HELPS bridges this gap by supporting them in becoming familiar with the Australian academic culture.

7. Learning via Peer-to-Peer Interaction

In a university of over 40,000 students, HELPS has perceived that a notable proportion of students' learning has been impacted as a result of social isolation or lack of connection with fellow students and staff. This led to the creation of *HELPS U:Connect*, an overarching volunteer initiative encompassing three distinctive programmes that enable students to engage with peers, professional and academic staff, alumni and the wider community, instilling them with a sense of belonging and community. HELPS volunteering programmes not only assist students but benefit the volunteers themselves in that they foster leadership and resourcefulness, attributes that are highly coveted in the workplace.

8. Open Collaboration

HELPS' receptiveness to new ideas and working with colleagues throughout UTS is demonstrated by its participation in numerous projects and initiatives. Working within SSU, and in collaboration with UTS Careers, it designed a blended course targeting professional communication skills in the workplace. The benefit to students is that it enables them to develop robust professional identities and future-focused graduate capabilities in a staged, scaffolded and interactive way. HELPS closely liaises with academics. In functioning as an intermediary between students and faculties, HELPS is able to work with teaching staff to arrange in-lecture promotions, develop customised workshops and provide opportunities for academics to articulate requirements for demanding assignments. This allows the HELPS Team to assist students in managing any language challenges and advice on information they need to fulfil assessment criteria.

9. Institutional and Educational Community Recognition

The UTS Planning and Quality Unit has placed HELPS in the 'strong performance' category. In 2014, as part of a longitudinal study, Emeritus Professor Bruce King undertook an independent review of English language support at UTS [7] confirming that 'the creation of HELPS and the associated changes have been an unequivocal success and are widely regarded as being so'. In 2015, HELPS' achievements were recognised by receiving a *UTS Learning and Teaching Award for Academic Support*. The success of HELPS and its raised profile has subsequently gained acknowledgement from the broader educational community and resulted in invitations to showcase its initiatives at education conferences including ISSOTL (International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning), the Association for Academic Language and Learning (AALL), Students, Transitions, Achievement, Retention, Success (STARS) and Australasian Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS). In 2016, HELPS garnered national recognition with an Australian Office of Learning and Teaching Citation for 'Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning'.

10. Concluding Remarks

HELPS is an example of a highly accessible service that supports student academic literacy and success. It has demonstrated its effectiveness through rigorous evaluation, both internally and externally, and has become a benchmark for excellence in its field. Open to working with all stakeholders, HELPS supports students holistically to instil confidence and provide positive learning experiences empowering them to become more independent learners in their academic studies and beyond.

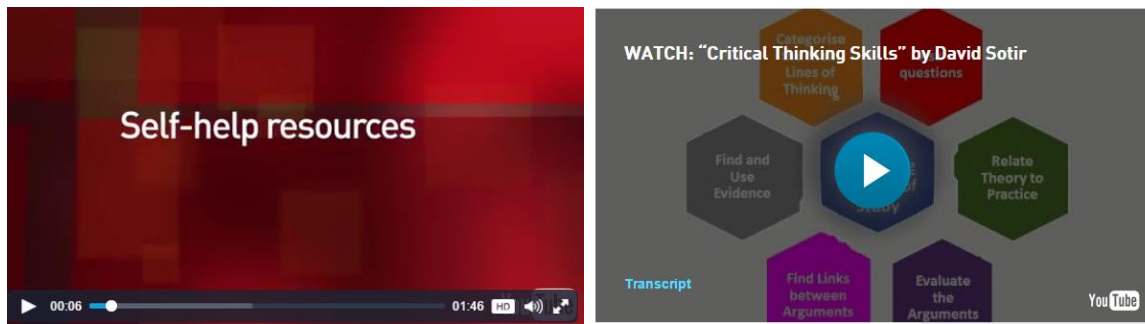## 11. Appendices
Appendix 1: UTS HELPS and Library Videos https://vimeo.com/170399972

Appendix 2: UTS HELPS Self-help Resources and Sample Screencast
http://www.uts.edu.au/currentstudents/support/helps/self-help-resources

Appendix 3: Sample Annotated Assignments
https://www.uts.edu.au/sites/default/files/HSM%20Improving%20Quality%20and%20Safety%20in%20Healthcare%20%28Annotated%20Sample%20Essay%20-%20David%29.pdf

Comments annotated by David Sotir, HELPS

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