In their own words:
what migrants say about succeeding in TAFE

Marie Zuvich
Canberra Institute of Technology

ABSTRACT

Research into the determinants of success for migrant students at the Canberra Institute of Technology found that English proficiency was only one element; awareness of and ability to operate in a different educational culture was seen by a group of successful migrant students as the principal factor.

Our research, conducted in 1997-98, consisted of taped focus group discussions and individual interviews of 10 migrant students from a variety of cultural backgrounds studying various diploma programs at the CIT. Students were also asked to write about the differences they perceived between the way they had been educated in their country of origin and that of their Australian TAFE experience.

This paper will describe our response to the findings of this research which has involved the implementation of a multi-pronged program of subject-specific, integrated support and staff development. The aim of our program is to increase the success rates of migrant students but a key underlying need is to develop awareness amongst teachers and students of the educational cultural differences between the Australian VET system and that common to many of our migrant students.

Using AVETMISS standards we have consistently shown a significant increase in the success rates of migrant students in our program over the past three years. The findings and approaches described in the paper are equally applicable to International students.

INTRODUCTION

In 1997 the Canberra Institute of Technology employed a Student Services Officer to implement strategies to enhance the success rates of its migrant student population. This was in response to research (Wapshere, 1996) which had shown that, overall, migrants performed at a lower rate than their English-speaking background counterparts and, interestingly, lower than the International student cohort who had access to subject-specific tutorial support.

One of the main strategies employed was therefore the inclusion of such tutorial support for migrants in courses identified by the research as particularly problematic for this group. These courses have included the Communication modules which are part of a Diploma in Information Technology and the Law modules included in the Advanced Diploma of Accounting.

Whilst delivering this support it became obvious to the team that successful module results were not just the product of hard work and proficiency in English. Failure did exist within these parameters and conversely there were instances of students passing whose English was not judged to be adequate.

THE RESEARCH

The team had some ideas as to what the other determinants of success were but decided to ask a group of successful students what they thought. Focus groups were run with ten migrant students who were in their final stages of diploma courses. Their cultural backgrounds varied from South East Asian to Latin American and Northern European, and their courses included Information Technology, Civil Engineering and Office Administration. These students were also asked to complete a questionnaire, write freely about their experiences of studying in a different educational culture and take part in both individual and group interviews which were taped.

What we learnt from the students was what we had anticipated - that the main issue was one of being able to adapt to a new educational culture. Specifically we found that migrant students needed:

- a clear understanding of the underlying cultural expectations of the course and their teachers;
- knowledge of appropriate strategies to fulfil these expectations;

- an environment in which these strategies could be modelled and practised;
- and the confidence and time management skills to implement these strategies.

Students also identified other factors which they had found to be important in Australian education but not as relevant in their previous educational environment. These included:

- the importance of reading widely on a topic;
- the necessity and value of asking questions in class;
- and the independent learning style requiring students to become decision-makers about their learning.

In addition we were able to identify nine distinct stages of transition that many migrant students seem to pass through in coming to terms with learning in a different educational culture. And, from what we learnt from the students themselves, we could describe strategies useful to both classroom and support teachers in assisting migrants to pass through each stage.

All of these findings have been published as *In their own words: a practical guide to helping the migrants in your TAFE class based on the experiences of successful migrant students*. (Sharma, 1999)

SUPPORT FOR MIGRANTS

Knowing that cultural adaptability is a major determinant of success for migrant students, it became incumbent upon us to change our style of tutorial support to reflect this understanding. Moreover we realised the importance of classroom teachers being able to understand something of the educational culture that these students had previously operated in. In fact, wouldn't it be great if all TAFE students had such an awareness? Gradually it became obvious that it was necessary to deal with all three groups if we were to raise the success rates of our target group.

However our main target group was still the migrant students in identified modules. And we realised that the traditional drop-in study centres were not going to allow us to offer either appropriate or sufficient support. Firstly these centres rely on students admitting their weakness to an unknown authority, something which is usually anathema to many migrants, and secondly, if a student does ask for assistance, it is often too late and a last minute band-aid solution in the form of assignment-editing is all that can be given. If we were going to make a difference, we had to become proactive in identifying students at risk and this meant becoming a core part of the teaching-learning experience.

The process that has emerged is as follows. An area is first identified as being at risk of having low success rates for its migrant students through on-going statistical analysis and by the number of students self-identifying on the enrolment form as needing help with English. A tutor is then assigned to a group of modules in this area and becomes part of the mainstream delivery by attending pre-delivery planning sessions, enrolment and orientation sessions as well as the first few lectures and tutorials. This all adds to the tutor's familiarity with the students, their needs, the content of the course and the teacher's particular style and expectations.

The tutor will also maintain email or phone contact with the class teacher to check that the tutorial sessions are directly relevant to the coursework. In addition the tutor may also deliver a guest presentation appropriate to the learning outcomes of the module, for example on cultural inclusiveness or workplace diversity. In this way, not only are the tutors establishing their credibility with the class and the teacher but they are also contributing to the development of an important group of underlying skills for the wider group.

Weekly tutorial sessions are then established with a group of students studying the modules in question. Here students are given support which has a dual purpose: to assist them in successfully completing the module whilst coming to a clearer understanding of its cultural basis. For example, not only would we revise the elements of a good report as taught by the Communications teacher but we would also explain the English discourse system and its reader-friendly, linear style and compare this to the students' own discourse systems. At the same time it is made clear that one system is not necessarily better than another only more culturally appropriate. We have found that it is important here to affirm the value of a student's previous modus operandi as this is a strong part of their persona.

It should be noted that the word *tutor* used above does not imply a lesser status than *teacher*. The word is used to differentiate the role of the staff in our support program from that of the classroom teacher. Our tutors are all qualified teachers, and paid as such, usually with an ESL background and an ability to cope with the content area of a variety of programs.

Sometimes an allowance of time has to be made for these tutors to feel confident with the content of the modules they are assisting with. In an extreme example, the tutors supporting the Law modules had to spend one semester attending Law lectures alongside the students they were assisting. They were given some allowance for this but it was not possible to fully compensate them financially. However, having worked with various models, we have found it more effective to employ an ESL teacher with a background in diversity issues than to employ a subject specialist. This emphasises the importance we place on assisting our students to get up to speed culturally as well as with the content of the course because the latter will not happen without the former. It is interesting to note that the tutors are usually willing to take on this extra load for a short time because of the job satisfaction that ensues. A model to investigate in the future would be to pay the fees of the tutor to enrol in the modules they are assisting with. This way they at least get the added benefit of skills recognition.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT

It was obvious to the team that staff needed to become aware of the cultural differences that impact on a student operating successfully in a new educational environment. Over the past few years members of the team had delivered various such sessions to teachers undertaking our internal Certificate IV in Tertiary Education & Training. But this was only reaching a small number of new TAFE teachers and these were not necessarily working in the areas of greatest migrant need.

A change was needed and fortuitously the publication of our book In their own words provided the impetus for a new direction. It was seen by some as slightly pretentious to have the book launched by the Chief Minister of the ACT but this meant that the senior managers of the Institute felt compelled to attend. Whilst there, we were able to showcase living examples of our work: the graphic designer of our book was a former student of our support program who had just landed her first full-time job; another former student played some guitar music from his recently-released debut CD; and a current student thanked the Chief Minister saying what a difference the program had made to her studies in Law for Accounting.

Invitations to address departmental staff meetings and run staff development sessions started to become more frequent from that time on. In these sessions we aim to explain the areas of difference that students perceive to be the most problematic. We have even invited migrant students in our program to address the group about how they have coped with studying in a different educational culture. From our evaluations it is clear that teachers greatly appreciate hearing about these issues directly from the students.

STUDENT BODY AS A WHOLE

From these successful staff development sessions, teachers are now inviting members of the team to address whole class groups on diversity issues. In these presentations and lessons, we outline the differences between individualist and collectivist cultures and how these differences are manifested in daily life.

We do not have a standard presentation but adapt our knowledge and understandings to the needs of the particular group. For example, this year we have delivered sessions on diversity as related to Reception Protocol and Quality Teams in the Diploma of Office Administration, and sessions on Workplace Diversity, looking at diverse cultures as an opportunity for improvement of service rather than as a drawback, for students in their final year of a Tourism Diploma.

CONCLUSION

We intend to continue to address the issue of completion rates for migrant students by working with all three groups as described in this paper. With a tightening funding base, our challenge for the future is to maintain our quality service to migrant students, teachers and the whole student body of our

Institute, and to find ways of increasing our reach into our TAFE community without actually spending more money.

References

Sharma, A. (1999) *In their own words: a practical guide to helping the migrants in your TAFE class based on the experiences of successful migrant students*, Canberra Institute of Technology.

Wapshere, D. (1996) *Promoting the successful access and participation of non-English speaking background students in TAFE mainstream courses*. Canberra Institute of Technology

Zuvich, M (1996) 'The Language of Assessment: an investigation into the linguistic appropriateness of assessment tools used in a range of modules in the Canberra Institute of Technology in 1994', in Clayton, B and House, R (eds) *Working Away at CBA: Improving assessment practice*.