

## **‘Prevention is better than Cure’: Timely provision of strategies for success to RMIT Business Portfolio students.**

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### **Abstract:**

At the ISANA Victorian Branch State Conference in October, 2005, Heather and Mary, together with our esteemed colleague, Lila Kemlo, presented our ‘students at risk’ project, designed to identify and provide an holistic, integrated program to enable Business Portfolio students to gain essential skills for academic and social success. A major feature of this program was the collaboration between members of academic staff of the Business Portfolio, the Learning Skills Unit, the Business Library, Student Services Group and the Student Union. United by a common goal – the empowerment of students – investigation of skills needed to succeed in assessment tasks in a number of business courses (subjects) was undertaken through co-operation between lecturers and learning skills advisors. Members of the project team also undertook to examine reasons students with whom they worked on an individual basis gave for finding themselves ‘at risk’ of academic failure and possible exclusion from their program of study. The object was to determine skills which, if they could be taught, might assist students to improve their rate of success in the future. What started out as a ‘remedial’ exercise, during the course of the first semester of the project, changed focus to that of a ‘preventive’ measure for current and future students. Dissemination of the current findings and changes to timing and methods of delivery of essential skills throughout this project form the basis of this presentation.

### **Key Words:**

Empowerment of students

Learning Skills

Social Skills

Students ‘at risk’ project

### **Introduction:**

Education is a constantly changing discipline: no-where is this truer than in the tertiary sector. Over the past 20 years, the number of students attending tertiary institutions has escalated – both in overall student enrolments and in the numbers of international students studying in Australia.

Significant changes have taken place in tertiary institutions around Australia between 1991 and 2006. The numbers of students, both local and international, attending Australian universities has increased enormously. Between 1992 and 2001 student enrolments increased by 30%, from 559,400 in 1992 to 726,400 in 2001 (DEST 2002-2004). As well, the number of overseas students in higher education doubled from 1994 – 2000 (ABS 2003 p. 4-5). The most common area of study for international students in both higher education and TAFE was Business, particularly in the areas of administration and economics (ABS 2003, p. 6).

This overall trend has been reflected in enrolments at RMIT where this project was conducted. There have been large changes in the number of students, both commencing and overall at RMIT.

RMIT University

<b>Commencing enrolments</b>		<b>Total enrolment</b>	
1993	8,298	1993	23,748
2001	13,421	2001	32,044
% Increase	61.7%	% Increase	34.9%

Concerned about the number of Business Portfolio students finding themselves ‘at risk of academic failure’, a diverse group of RMIT staff came together in June, 2005 to discuss the reasons students had given for failure to meet required academic standards for success. A ‘working group’ was formed to analyse the reasons given by students and to formulate strategies to –

- (a) develop and/or present skills workshops in a timely (preventive) manner with the aim of increasing students’ chances of success in their academic studies and in their social interactions with peers; and
- (b) assist students categorised as ‘at risk’ of failure at academic progress interviews to gain skills previously lacking or underdeveloped to help them improve their chances of success during the remainder of that semester.

The focus of the project was on skill building, both for preventive and remedial purposes.

Members of the team were –

Dr. Kim Watty – Director of Teaching Quality, School of Accounting and Law  
 Ms. Heather Bigelow – Consultant – Cross Cultural Issues, Business Portfolio (Convenor)  
 Mr. Costa Englezos – Co-ordinator, SLAMS project, Business Portfolio  
 Ms. Lila Kemlo – Key Learning Skills Adviser (Business Portfolio), Learning Skills Unit  
 Ms. Mary Kerstjens – Learning Skills Adviser, Learning Skills Unit  
 Ms. May Khanam – International Student Adviser, Learning Skills Unit  
 Mr. John Terrell – Business Portfolio Liaison Librarian  
 Mr. Steve Boucher – Student Rights Officer, RMIT Student Union  
 Ms. Liz Thompson – Student Rights Officer, RMIT Student Union.

### **Aims of the Project:**

- (a) to analyse the reasons given by students for finding themselves ‘at risk’ of failing their academic program and leading to the possibility of exclusion from their chosen program of study:
- (b) to collaboratively design, produce and proactively offer additional resources to students with the objective of raising their awareness of workshops and services available to teach skills necessary for greater success, academically and socially.
- (c) to provide an ‘holistic’ foundation of skills – both in the form of a learning skills ‘foundation’ and as an avenue through which students might improve social skills, thereby making their experience of study at RMIT more rewarding.

### **Reasons students find themselves ‘at risk’ of academic failure:**

At the first meeting of the working group, the following reasons were offered by members, based on much experience of working with students, both ‘local’ and ‘international’ –

- Transition to university
- Cultural adjustment issues, psychosocial and academic in nature
- English language problems
- Lack of necessary learning skills, such as ‘time management’, essay writing, effective reading techniques, presentation skills, etc.
- Difficulty in working in groups of students on group assessment tasks
- Financial difficulties
- Career decisions – students undertaking the ‘wrong’ academic program for their interests, skills and future career aspirations
- Family and relationship problems
- Grief and loss
- Inability to manage level of stress
- Psychological problems such as examination anxiety, depression, etc.
- Loneliness, isolation
- Chronic illness
- Temporary or permanent disability
- ‘Self deception’ – not understanding that although a student might only have 12 hours of class contact per week, they are required to spend at least three times this amount of time on work for their assessment tasks and examination preparation
- Imbalance of time devoted to paid employment and to study requirements
- Immigration related issues, such as -
  - (a) insufficient attendance at classes
  - (b) need to earn maximum points possible to support applications for permanent residency in Australia on completion of academic programs.

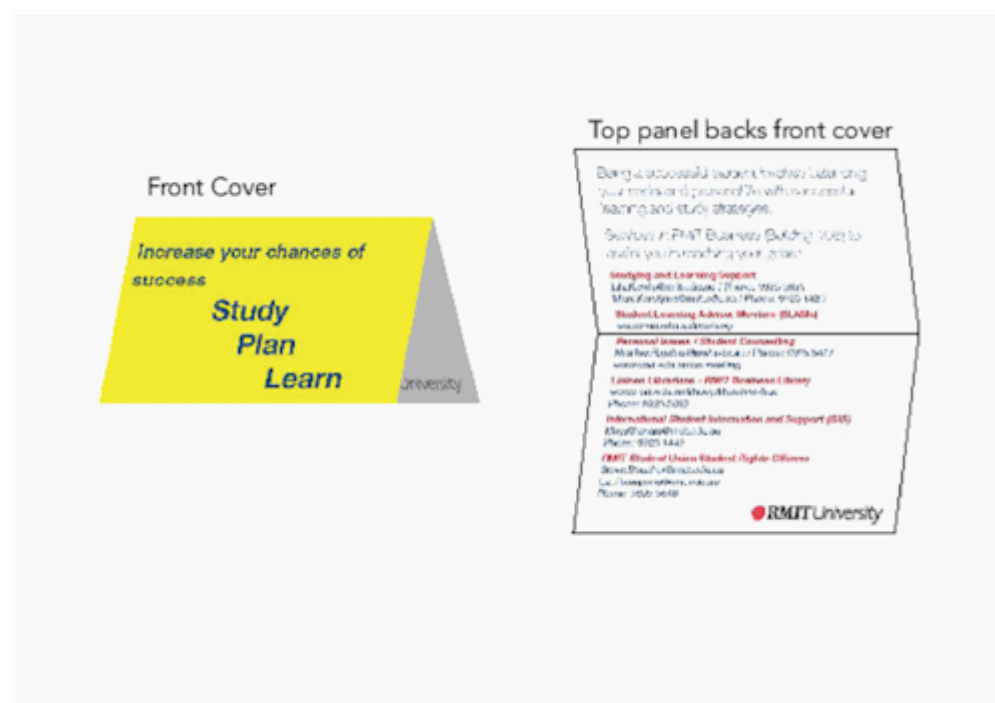
The list, above, indicated that, in the experience of the members of the ‘students at risk’ working group, students may benefit from assistance in the areas of academic,

social, and 'living skills'. Steps taken to address these three areas of possible concern are described, below.

### **Achievements:**

#### **Semester 2, 2005 –**

- A folding, credit sized card was developed which listed assistance available to students in the RMIT Business building and which also contained telephone and e-mail contact numbers and addresses. These cards were produced in time to be distributed to students during 'at risk' interviews in a number of Schools within the Business Portfolio.



(‘Yellow Card’ developed by Natasha Emerson, Public Relations Unit, Business Portfolio, 2005, in consultation with the ‘Students At Risk’ working group members.)

**Figure 1: Assistance, located within the Business Building, available to RMIT Business Students**

#### **Academic -**

- An increased number of learning skills workshops was conducted by Lila Kemlo and Mary Kerstjens, Learning Skills Unit. The topics were presented in a timely manner according to the learning tasks faced by students during the semester. The workshops were advertised on the Learning Skills Unit website, through a ‘hotlink’ with the Business Library website, and on the ‘home page’ of the Business Portfolio website. Students were able to submit their names for the workshop(s) of their choice via e-mailed messages to one of the learning skills advisors. Additionally, booking sheets for each session were displayed on the noticeboard in the student lounge adjoining the offices

of the learning skills advisors. This arrangement provided easy access, at any time the building was open, for students wishing to enrol in the sessions.

The sessions proved to be very popular with students and were constantly 'over subscribed'. Repeat sessions were then conducted so the students wishing to gain the knowledge imparted in particular sessions were able to do so.

The 'Learning Lab', which was successfully launched in Semester 2, 2005, provides interactive workshops which students can access on-line. This has proved beneficial to students who are unable or reluctant to attend face-to-face workshops. The Learning lab ([www.dlswweb.rmit.edu.au](http://www.dlswweb.rmit.edu.au)) offers assistance with assessment tasks – how to structure and write an essay, report, literature review or reflective journal and how to deliver an effective oral presentation. It also provides assistance with Study and Writing Skills. The section 'Learning Query' has a frequently asked question section and it also enables students to email a study question to a teacher for a personal response.

All of the activities, listed above, are open to any student – local or international - of RMIT Business Portfolio, at any level from TAFE to Postgraduate studies.

- The Business Library and the Learning Skills Unit programs on topics such as 'Plagiarism', 'Referencing', etc., were 'cross referenced' via computer 'hot links' on the websites of each unit/area.
- A very successful 'student learning adviser mentor' (SLAMS) program was conducted in which students achieving grades of 'HD' or 'D' in business courses acted as Mentors/Learning Advisers to new or continuing students wishing to improve their academic understanding and performance.
- Discussion was held with two academic members of staff of the School of Accounting and Law who agreed, with enthusiasm, to work with the Learning Skills Unit specialists on analysing the assessment tasks required of students in the courses taught by the two academic members of staff. The intention was to 'micro-analyse' the skills needed by students for success in these two courses. Additional workshops were to be planned and conducted to ensure the teaching of the necessary skills to students, if necessary.

#### **Academic and Social Skills –**

As discussed in the evaluation report (Englezos 2005) of the SLAMS (Student Learning Advisor Mentors) project during this semester, students helped students with their academic needs and, in the best case scenarios, made new friends in the process

New students, international students in particular, who arrive in Melbourne after the formal Orientation period, often experience isolation and enormous stress in the first semester of study here. The SLAMS project has demonstrated a very positive function in assisting new students through their transition to study in the Business Portfolio and to living in Melbourne.

Previous research (Bigelow 2001) demonstrated that new students, in particular international students, expressed a wish for a 'guide' into the academic and social 'culture' of the university when they commence their new academic program. According to feedback, both formal and informal, from the SLAMS and from students who benefited by their assistance, the 'SLAMS' did provide both academic and social assistance and to students studying in the Business Portfolio for the first time.

In their recent study of 'The Health and Well-Being of International Students at the University of Melbourne' Rosenthal, Russell and Thomson (2006) also discuss 'academic, psychological and social aspects of acculturation' faced by international students in adjusting to different teaching and learning expectations and different 'rules' to be learned in relation to social situations.

Those students who volunteered to become 'SLAMS' also found their own interpersonal and communications skills increased (Englezos 2005).

### **'Living Skills'**

- 2 'Stress Management' and 2 'Healthy Living' workshops were conducted during the semester, the former by the Consultant – Cross Cultural Issues, and the latter by the Community Nurse, Student Services Group, Ms. Enisa Kasar.

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### **Semester 1, 2006 –**

#### **(1) Analysis of Academic Appeals Committee data –**

Members of the 'students at risk' working party had suggested, at their first meeting, a list of possible reasons why students might find themselves 'at risk' of academic failure. When we came to discuss the analysis of actual reasons given by students during the semester for finding themselves 'at risk' of academic failure, and ultimately 'at risk' of exclusion from their program of study, it was decided that analyses of data collected by members of the working group, for comparative purposes, could not readily be undertaken. The reason for the difficulty was that each member of the working group kept records in different ways and that the data therefore did not correlate for the analysis we wished to undertake.

We know that, in some Schools within the Business Portfolio, literally hundreds of applications for 'Special Consideration' are received at exam time. Most of these contain reasons given by students for experiencing difficulty with their studies and for possibly finding themselves 'at risk' of academic failure.

Additionally, there are also hundreds of 'student at risk' interviews conducted within the multitude of academic courses/subjects offered by the Business Portfolio. However, we were finally able to gain access to data from the Business Portfolio Academic Appeals Hearings for two semesters. The reasons students gave in both semesters are presented, below, in descending order of frequency. That is, 'personal illness' was given most often as the reason students had found themselves 'at risk' of academic failure, while 'Financial' and 'Work Related' reasons were given far less frequently. It is interesting to note that Language and Learning and

Assessment/Academic are also well down on the list of reasons given by students for being ‘at risk’.

Actual data drawn from the Business Portfolio Appeals Hearing showed the following

Semester 2, 2004	Semester 1, 2005
N=35	N = 58
Illness of Self	Illness of Self
Psychological Problems (Self)	Psychological Problems (Self)
Illness of Family Member	Illness of Family Member
Family problems	Family problems
Death of family member	Death of family member
Personal	Personal
Transition	Transition
Accommodation	Accommodation
Language & Learning	Language & Learning
Administrative	Administrative
Assessment/Academic	Assessment/Academic
Financial	Financial
Work Related	Work Related

**Table 1 - Students ‘at risk’ Reasons - Business Portfolio Appeals Committee**

It may be noted that there are similarities in reasons given above, by students finding themselves ‘at risk’ of academic failure to those in the study by Byng and Rees (2004, p.3).

## **(2) Change from ‘remedial’ to ‘preventive’ use of the ‘yellow cards’ –**

In Semester 2, 2005, the ‘yellow information cards’ were developed as a resource for members of staff conducting ‘at risk’ interviews with students to hand to students and suggest they seek help with whatever problems were preventing the students from achieving the academic success they desired. That is, they served a ‘remedial’ purpose.

In Semester 1, 2006, the cards were distributed during Transition/Orientation sessions. Attention was drawn to the cards and new students informed that the services listed, as well as those offered in the wider university community, were here to assist the students maximise their opportunities for both academic and social success. It was further emphasised that, should students find themselves at some stage being called to an ‘at risk’ interview, having sought the service and advice of those listed on the card would be considered to be to their advantage by their interviewer.

In addition to being distributed by members of academic staff conducting ‘at risk’ interviews, these cards are now available, at School reception desks and in student areas, throughout the building as it is understood that information has the greatest impact, and is likely to be acted upon, when it is needed ‘now’.

### **(3) Just in time' presentation of learning skills in classes**

Awareness of the difficulties experienced by many students in meeting the unfamiliar demands of academic work has resulted in greater collaboration between the Learning Skills Unit (LSU) and members of academic staff of the Business Portfolio. By request, LSU staff have teamed with lecturers to present a number of lectures, tutorials and classes to teach the learning skills needed for particular assessment tasks. Referencing remains an important issue and has been incorporated in classes at postgraduate and undergraduate level. A series of collaborative tutorials were run to enable students to better understand what is required when writing a report or a literature review.

The importance placed on oral communication as well as written communication in the workplace encouraged the School of Accounting and Law to include an oral presentation in their assessments. LSU staff were invited to present a series of workshops to outline the skills required to first year students.

The incorporation of these LSU sessions into class times has given added weight to the importance of academic skills as distinct from the content of the curriculum and has helped students to understand more fully what is required of them.

### **Conclusion –**

The three 'aims' of the project, above, have been addressed and, as a result of working on this project, a change of focus has occurred. A major emphasis is on preventive action as the method to best help new, and not so new, students to maximise their academic, and social, potential while studying programs in the Business Portfolio at RMIT.

The theme of this ISANA International Conference is 'Educate, Advocate, Empower'. It is our firm belief that 'Prevention is better than Cure' in relation to students' acquisition of a solid foundation of academic and social 'tools' to 'educate and empower' a greater number of students with the intention of increasing their chances of successfully attaining their goals of academic success. It is our intention to build upon knowledge gained through this project.

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