

2009

## Building Learning Communities in Residential Colleges

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This paper addresses the retention issues presented when large numbers of students from low socio-economic backgrounds and associated disadvantaged educational histories live together on-campus. It reports research in progress on a new approach taken at the University of New England (UNE), Australia, aimed at encouraging the growth of learning communities in colleges through the training and subsequent support of senior students charged with helping first year students negotiate the transition to successful university study. It outlines the issues faced by both the first year students and the senior students, strategies implemented, outcomes to date and plans for further change. UNE is a regional university with 5,000 on-campus students, half of whom live in seven residential colleges. It appears that for these students, traditional lectures and workshops on learning strategies and techniques are not as effective as layered, personal 'at the elbow' learning support in a non-threatening, social environment.

### Keywords

Learning communities, Residential colleges, Transition

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## **Building Learning Communities in Residential Colleges**

**Dr Robyn Muldoon**

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### **Abstract**

This paper addresses the retention issues presented when large numbers of students from low socio-economic backgrounds and associated disadvantaged educational histories live together on-campus. It reports research in progress on a new approach taken at the University of New England (UNE), Australia, aimed at encouraging the growth of learning communities in colleges through the training and subsequent support of senior students charged with helping first year students negotiate the transition to successful university study. It outlines the issues faced by both the first year students and the senior students, strategies implemented, outcomes to date and plans for further change. UNE is a regional university with 5,000 on-campus students, half of whom live in seven residential colleges. It appears that for these students, traditional lectures and workshops on learning strategies and techniques are not as effective as layered, personal 'at the elbow' learning support in a non-threatening, social environment.

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## Introduction

The University of New England (UNE), Australia, is situated in a small city in regional New South Wales. Two thirds of its students study by distance. One third are on-campus students, half of whom reside in the university's residential system (commonly called colleges in Australia). The majority of first year on-campus students begin their studies as residential students and are mostly recent school-leavers. They are therefore experiencing living away from home for the first time. Additionally, a large number have entered university through an alternative entry pathway which has enabled many from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds to access university education.

In Australia, the first year university drop out rate is high (Taylor, 2008; White, 2006). Approximately one third of students who begin university studies do not graduate and approximately half of those drop out in their first year (Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs, 2000; Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnes, 2005; McMillan, 2005). There is some evidence that suggests that college living exacerbates this problem rather than ameliorates it, despite the system's best efforts. Non-traditional entry pathways also tend to impact on new students' preparedness for university study, which in turn impacts on retention.

This paper addresses the particular retention issues experienced by UNE's first year on-campus residential students and reports research in progress on a new approach taken in recent years at UNE encouraging the growth of learning communities through the selection, training and subsequent support of senior students helping first year students negotiate the transition to successful university study. It appears that traditional lectures and workshops on learning strategies and techniques are not as effective as layered, personal 'at the elbow' support of students in a non-threatening, social environment.

## Background

In Australia, students moving from secondary education to tertiary institutions face a range of issues that effect successful transition (Clegg, Bradley, & Smith, 2006; Macdonald, 2000, McInnes & James, 1995; Taylor, 2008; Trotter & Roberts, 2006; Yorke, 2001). After many years of hard work to gain the high school results needed for the course that will lead to their career of choice, a disturbingly large number of students make rapid exits from the system as described above. Others seem to be 'sleepwalking' through inappropriate courses, despite their success at school (Krause et al., 2005; White et al., 1995). Students interviewed in ongoing research consistently mention the following issues as affecting their first year at university: lack of motivation; difficulty coping with changed teaching and assessment practices; feelings of isolation and loneliness; and the challenges posed by a changed lifestyle.

***Changes in motivation and sense of purpose:*** While undertaking their senior high school years students have a very clear goal, with parents, teachers, peers and society all pushing them hard to achieve the best possible result in their final exams. However, after the rigours of these years many first year students are emotionally exhausted, suffer long periods of letdown, and with their next major goal (of achieving a tertiary degree) many years in the future, find it hard to stay motivated and sustain a sense of purpose, as well as manage their own time effectively (Taylor, 2008).

***Changes in teaching and assessment:*** During senior high school there is emphasis on the processes of learning and assessment. Small classes encourage trust between students and teacher,

questions from students, confident student participation, and provide constant feedback, all leading to quality outcomes. Teachers manage subjects for their students, keep track of tasks that must be done and provide detailed breakdowns of the criteria and timelines for completion. While students are usually pleased to see the end of this teacher dependence, they often have not learned how to manage their own learning when cast into the tertiary arena (Horstmanhof & Zimitat, 2004; Kantanis, 2002 cited in Stone, 2005).

Teaching at tertiary institutions is more remote and transmissive, with emphasis on independent learning and retention of knowledge for exams. Students are required to do large amounts of work on their own, but lecturers rarely check to ensure that this happens. Consequently, students do not regard the work as necessary or important, and often fail to do it (Taylor, 2008; White, 2006).

**Isolation and loneliness:** After spending years with the same group of students at secondary school, most students have developed strong support groups and friendship structures. School teachers know them and care about them. Suddenly at university this is all taken away. As one of many at a seemingly impersonal campus, students can feel overwhelmed and intimidated. Making friends in these situations can be difficult, with students who were contributors at school finding they are unsure and inhibited in tertiary classes, thereby reducing their learning experience. Without a support group to share these experiences and help regain confidence, some students wilt and withdraw. Lack of social integration into the university environment is one of the key causes of attrition (Stone, 2005; Tinto, 1993; Trotter & Roberts, 2006).

**Social life and living changes:** For a large number of students, the move to tertiary study is linked to the move from the family home. Away from school rules and home regulations, and lured by the possibilities of university life, it is easy to 'lose the plot' and have social and living situations swamp all academic aspirations. The opportunity to experiment with image, relationships, drugs of various kinds, and alternative lifestyles can be a great temptation, but also a part of developing as a unique individual. Maintaining a balance between conflicting needs is one of the greatest challenges of tertiary study. Other challenges resulting from living away from home are financial pressures, homesickness and accommodation issues (Centre for Higher Education Management and Policy 1999; Walsh, Crawford & Macdonald, 1999; Krause et al., 2005).

There is yet another dimension to UNE students. UNE is a regional university with a flexible, open access policy which encourages students from diverse backgrounds to participate in higher education. A higher number of students from rural and isolated backgrounds than the national average enrol at UNE (Planning and Institutional Research, 2008). Membership of these groups is often an indicator of disadvantaged educational background resulting from isolation or lack of resources or opportunity (Arnison, 2000, 180; Trotter & Roberts, 2006). This in turn often means lower skills levels or cultural capital or 'product of education', as defined by Bourdieu (Brantlinger, 2003; Grenfell & James, 1998; Marginson, 1997). This has an additional impact on retention at UNE.

Virtually all students experience some or all of these issues. What determines those who pass from those who fail seems to be their capacity to adequately manage them. Students look forward to the changes that university life brings, but feel intimidated by them at the same time. They are concerned they do not have the skills needed to deal with the changes, even though they are excited about making those changes. Unfortunately, many are also ignorant about what tertiary study will be like and how tertiary institutions operate. This situation is often compounded by the experience of residing on-campus because of the myriad opportunities to engage in attractive and exciting extra-curricular

activity presented by large numbers of students living together. Despite its best efforts, the residential system in many cases serves to increase attrition issues in the first year of university study.

The UNE residential system for many years offered a tutor-based support system in which postgraduate students in need of part-time jobs and on-campus accommodation were employed to provide discipline-based learning support to college residents. This has gradually changed over recent years, with a growing tendency to enlist senior undergraduates into academic support roles. As these students tend to be not yet qualified or experienced enough to engage in tutoring, the support offered was switched from tutoring to study skills support with an emphasis on not 're-teaching' but promoting effective study skills and approaches to learning, and acting as peer mentors. Substantial literature reports the benefits of peer mentoring programs at university (Glaser, Hall, & Haleperin, 2006; Godwin & Wijeyewardene, 2006; Pope & Van Dyke, 1999; Treston, 1999). The academic mentors, no longer tutors, were trained in running study skills workshops and mentoring and referral techniques. This redirection in role occurred in 2003.

However, evaluation since then has indicated that this was not working well. Study skills workshops run by inexperienced and tentative academic mentors were rarely a preferred activity in the face of the vast array of more attractive social, sporting and cultural activities on offer within the residential system, across the campus and within the nearby city. Also, the skills required to effectively facilitate this type of learning support were not properly developed in a three day training workshop. Indeed many experienced teachers find such work challenging.

Consequently a new approach has been gradually implemented - that of building learning communities and modelling good study habits, rather than attempting to teach them overtly.

## **Learning Communities**

Experience across the world indicates that the integration of students into a learning community is one of the strongest indicators of success - particularly in university study (Krause et al., 2005; Tinto, 1998). Learning communities allow members to share concerns; develop a sense belonging; care about each other; develop trusts that are vital for good learning; work together; and learn from peers (Macdonald, 2000).

This type of integration operates on several levels and involves paying attention to social as well as academic needs of students. For this to occur students need to develop a strong affiliation with both the academic environment and in their social setting outside the classroom (Benseman, Coxon, Anderson, & Anae, 2006, 150-151; Clegg, Bradley, & Smith, 2006, 102-103; Krause, 2001; Rivers, 2005, 3). Social interaction in the learning process not only enhances the quality of learning but also contributes to students' sense of belonging within the learning community and to their sense of competency. Social interaction outside the learning process, but as part of the university experience, strengthens this sense of belongingness and connectedness to the learning community (Astin, 1993; DeShields, Kara, & Kaynak, 2005; Kraemer, 1997; McMillan, 2005; Nagda, Gregerman, Jonides, von Hippel, & Lerner, 1998; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

## **Implementation**

In 2007 the training program of the residential academic mentors included coverage of the benefits of learning communities and the participants were encouraged to establish specified study evenings in their respective colleges at which students could gather to work independently, in groups, seek



assistance or actively engage in study skills training. The heads of the colleges were asked to support these study nights by discouraging any other college activities on the designated night. Five of the seven residential colleges at UNE attempted to implement designated study evenings in their various dining halls, three with some success. One of the latter group is the subject of this study. Of the two that failed, one was because there were too many competing activities on the night, and the other because the lighting in the dining hall was inadequate, and the level of ambient noise was too high. Of the two that did not attempt to instigate a study night, one was because it did not have the appropriate facilities, being a self catering residence and therefore not in possession of a dining hall or area big enough to accommodate large numbers of students. The other college was of the belief that the 'culture' within the college would not support such a venture.

In the college which is the subject of this study, a large number of students now turn up for what they call Tues2Study on a Tuesday evening in their dining hall. It was modelled on a longer standing program in another college where the dining hall was opened up for a 'studyfest' on one evening a week, but without formal academic support provided.

All the academic mentors (n=11) attend Tues2Study each week. This is a requirement of their roles. Their job descriptions were adjusted at the beginning of the 2008 academic year to make this mandatory, thereby reflect the growing success of Tues2Study and the college's intention to build on the previous year's progress. Additionally, academic staff members of the university who are informally attached to that college through its Senior Common Room group (n=10) are also encouraged to attend. One academic with a student learning support background attends regularly and provides mentoring for the academic mentors as well as roaming the dining hall to provide general assistance to the students. Supper, which includes large quantities of cake and biscuits, is served during the evening.

At Tues2Study there are particular tables that are consistently used by groups sharing a common area of study, such as Science or Law. These groups are strongly social, but are also very productive and supportive of the table members' learning needs. These table groups are particularly dynamic 'learning communities' in the way they interact, and the degree of peer teaching and learning that occurs.

Other students choose to find quieter space on a less occupied table, only seeking interaction when they have a question about content, or are unable to interpret an instruction or assignment. They then seek the help of an academic mentor, the roaming academic, or Senior Common Room member or a fellow student.

## **Methodology**

In order to explore students' reasons for attending Tues2Study and what they were gaining from their attendance, a short questionnaire was prepared with three questions asking why students attended Tues2Study, what they did at Tues2Study and what they gained from Tues2Study.

On one particular Tues2Study night in Semester 1, 2008 the questionnaire was distributed to all in attendance (n=84 out of a total College population of 280) along with information about the voluntary and confidential nature of the survey. All student attendees were treated equally. No distinction was made between Tues2Study participants and academic mentors so that no assumptions were made about the reasons for the mentors' attendance. Participants were encouraged to give three answers to each of the three questions but not all did. 75 surveys were returned, giving a response rate of 89%.

The qualitative data were managed and analysed using QSR NVivo software. All of the results were prepared for Nvivo and then imported into an Nvivo project. Tree parent nodes were established for each of the three questions, each with child nodes to represent academic and social themes. These two themes were chosen because they represent the core features of learning communities as described above. Each individual answer in each document was coded as academic or social for each question and then recoded as grandchild nodes named according to emerging reasons within each of the two themes.

## Results

In answer to the question about why participants attended Tues2Study night there were 179 responses. More than two thirds of the responses indicated that participants attended Tues2Study for serious study-related reasons, as opposed to social reasons, as set out in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Question 1 Reasons for attending Tues2study (n=179)**

	Academic theme	Social theme
Reasons for participation in Tues2study	71% (127 responses)	29% (52 responses)

Of the 127 responses related to study the majority were about using the opportunity to seek assistance (50/127) and wanting to utilize the dedicated study time/environment (33/127). Other reasons given were wanting to be motivated to work (7/127) and ones related to being on academic probation (4/127). Academic probation relates to first year students considered to be at risk of failing, based on results to date, who have been strongly urged to attend the study evening by college administration.

There were 24 responses out of a possible 33 about attending as academic mentors (n=11). The mentors also said they attended Tues2Study to do study of their own (9), raising the number of attendees overall who wanted to utilise the dedicated study time to 42.

The remainder of the responses (52) to the question about why students chose to attend Tues2Study were about social reasons. The majority of these (30/52) were about wanting to study with others in a social environment. The remainder (22/52) were reasons totally unrelated to study and mostly about the cake served for supper.

Examples of these responses are contained in Table 2 below.

**Table 2: Question 1 -Student quotes**

Seeking assistance (50/179)	<i>...to ask questions in relation to anything I don't understand about subject; ...to get help from academic assistants; ...to help get assistance when studying; ...ask academic staff for advice.</i>
Utilising dedicated study time (33/179)	<i>I'm guaranteed to get about 2hrs of study in; It puts the focus squarely on study for a few hours; ... a chance to set time aside to do work; ...for productive environment.</i>
Wanting to be motivated (7/179)	<i>...because it helps motivate the study; ...to get myself motivated for working; ....to get motivated.</i>

Probation (4/179)	<i>Because I have to!!; have to come; academic probation; part of my academic improvement scheme.</i>
Attending as academic mentors (24/179)	<i>...to create a consistent study routine; As a position holder I have signed a contract to attend; To help the 1<sup>st</sup> years with any problems they might have; I want to set a good example; ...because I'm an Academic Assistant.</i>
Academic mentors: other reasons (9/179)	<i>I have four college positions and need to get my work done; It provides a set time each week to get work done; To do some of my own work.</i>
Wanting to study in a social environment (30/179)	<i>...a friendly atmosphere; ...the environment/atmosphere; ...different atmosphere to studying; ...get out of my room for study; ...warm glowing atmosphere; ...to get out of my room; ...to get work done in a socially positive environment.</i>
Non-work/study reasons (22/179)	<i>Cake; because the cake is super fantastic; because they serve nice cake; bright friendly faces; friendly and food; because it's fun!!!</i>

In answer to the question about what participants did at Tues2Study night there were 169 responses. The majority of these (152) indicated that serious study and academic work did take place. Just 17 responses were about socializing and/or eating cake as set out in Table 3 below.

**Table 3: Question 2 - What happens at Tues2study (n=169)**

	Academic theme	Social theme
What actually took place at Tues2study	90% (152 responses)	10% (17 responses)

Of the 152 responses about study, the majority indicated that meaningful work or study did occur (119/152). There were just 20 who said they sought assistance despite the majority indicating in response to the first question that that was the reason for attending. Possibly many that asked for help and received it saw this as achieving a positive outcome. Many may not have considered a casual question to another person on their table as seeking assistance, reserving that for a specific question to one of the support students or staff. None said that they were unable to get the assistance they sought. There were 13 responses from academic mentors about giving assistance to others on the night. Five of these also said they used the opportunity to do their own work/study as well.

There were 17 (10%) responses about what happens at Tues2Study that were about social activity. Ten of these were purely social; seven were about working together in a social group.

Examples of these responses are contained in Table 4 below.

**Table 4: Question 2 - Student quotes**

Doing meaningful work (119/169)	<i>Work; assignments; study; read; take notes; French practice; economics – work on tutorial Q's; Psychology 101- study; notes/assignments; English homework; highlighting; prep for assignments; summaries for exam; prepare for upcoming</i>
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	<i>tutorials; summaries; group work; made sure Prac book was up to date for entomology; edit drafts; do my own study and revision; organise my work schedule; revision with people from my classes; brainstorm ideas; mostly work for Enco 100; revise lecture notes; discuss the weeks work, test, assignments, etc. with other people doing my course; organise my notes, readings, draft assessments from the past week; read, write and ponder .</i>
Seeking assistance (20/169)	<i>Go through things I didn't understand at lectures; help with assignments; speak with academic assistants; talked to accy (academic mentor) about assignment; ask questions; discuss readings with other students; ask questions if I need to; talk to academics; get help with any problems I have.</i>
Mentors (n=11) giving assistance (13/169)	<i>Help other people with their work; help first year Ed. Students; help others; help freshers; I help students (Academic Assistant); answer all queries possible.</i>
Mentors doing own work (5/11 – also included in the 119 above who did meaningful work)	<i>Do my own study and revision; organise my work schedule: do some of my own work.</i>
Working in a social group (7/169)	<i>Chat with others in my course; social study; work with students doing the same subjects; group study – everyone's thoughts.</i>
Socialising (10/169)	<i>Socialise; drink tea; eat cake; talk.</i>

In answer to the question about what participants gained from Tues2Study night there were 141 responses. The majority of these (128) indicated that serious study and academic work did take place. Just 13 responses were about socializing and/or eating cake as set out in Table 5, and at least some of these were probably flippant.

**Table 5: What gained from Tues2study (n=141)**

	Academic theme	Social theme
What gained	91%	9%
From Tues2study	(128 responses)	(13 responses)

Of the 128 responses related to work/study, the biggest group of answers (51/128) was about getting some valuable work/study done or gaining motivation to study. Forty students said they received valuable assistance from others. A further 19 said that their confidence had been improved or their stress levels lowered. Seven responses were about the satisfaction derived from helping others and six responses were about the value of talking to others studying the same course. There were five responses that were negative ones about there being too much noise and distraction for the study night to be of use to them.

There were 13 (9%) responses about what was gained at Tues2Study that were social in nature. These were almost equally divided between being with or making friends and consuming supper.

Examples of these responses are contained in Table 6 below.

**Table 6: Question 3-Student quotes**

Getting valuable work done/gaining motivation (51/141)	<i>I actually do work; learning opportunities; completed work; knowledge; a chance to study without college distractions; guaranteed study at least once a week; study time; finish readings; substantive amount of study time; focused time to work; get through more work than I would otherwise on a Tuesday night; there's a definite 2hr period I can rely on each week; motivation to study; time set aside for work that's guaranteed to be there; satisfaction; a new attitude towards study; inspiration.</i>
Receiving valuable assistance (40/141)	<i>Better understanding of how to answer questions; assistance with assignments; help if I need it; greater understanding of my subject; extra help; helpful insights into how to prepare my assignments; easy access to assistance; help from accy's; advice and assistance from academics; help with challenging problems; outside/senior advice.</i>
Improved confidence (19/141)	<i>Confidence for essay writing; more confidence; better outlook; stress relief; it makes me feel like I've done something constructive!</i>
Value of helping others (7/141)	<i>Satisfaction due to helping others; see the progress of each person each week; satisfaction from helping people; a better understanding of the first year units (and my own).</i>
Value of contact with others in same course (6/141)	<i>Revision with people from my classes; ability to discuss the weeks work, test, assignments, etc. with other people doing my course; talking about past lectures.</i>
Problem of noise and distraction (5/141)	<i>Nothing yet - too noisy; little – noise needs to reduce; limited amount – less noise would be a lot better, not a good study environment; it is often too noisy to read – hard to concentrate. Some of my law readings are difficult and noise impacts.</i>
Socialising (13/141)	<i>Friends; nice cups of tea; friendships; free cake; hear the gossip; meet people in my faculty; friendship with fellow Ed students.</i>

So, while approximately one third of the responses about why students attended Tues2study (Question 1) were related to social reasons, the percentage of responses to the questions about what students did at Tues2study (Question 2), and what they gained (Question 3), that were social in nature, dropped to approximately one tenth (10% and 9% respectively). This suggests that the social side of Tues2study presents a significant incentive to attend but that students appreciate and understand that valuable work and study does take place. The results also indicate that the social side of group study is in itself valuable. Indeed, each of the students who said they were attending because of their probation requirements also cited the social aspect of Tues2Study (*To socialise; eat cake; warm glowing atmosphere; bright friendly faces; because it's fun!!!*) indicating that attendance was not completely against their will and possibly something they would continue beyond the duration of their probation. Just four respondents complained about Tues2Study evenings being noisy. Of those two nonetheless gained some benefit (*Limited amount – less noise would be a lot better; I get my weekly Q's done (but) it is often too noisy to read – hard to concentrate*).

## Discussion

The student responses in this study are consistent with the literature about the benefits of learning communities and also indicate that this approach to supporting student learning has a clear potential to alleviate most, if not all, of the common issues faced by first year university students described above: lack of motivation and sense of purpose; dealing with different modes of teaching and assessment; the effects of isolation and loneliness; and the challenge of balancing social life and changed living conditions. Learning communities foster a sense of belonging, an important ingredient of retention

(Pope & Van Dyke, 1999; Tinto, 1998; Trotter & Roberts, 2006). Participants benefit from sharing concerns; developing a sense of belonging, caring about each other; developing the trusts that are vital for good learning; working together; and learning from peers.

### ***Sharing concerns***

Without the reassurance of friends experiencing the same sort of problems it is easy to feel that you are the only one with a problem, and hence feel isolated from all the other (apparently coping) students around you. Sharing concerns prevents them from becoming obstacles to learning. There were many responses that indicated that Tues2study participants were gaining this type of benefit. In particular there are numerous opportunities to listen in to other conversations and requests for help, and either learn vicariously, or at least develop a broader understanding of how other students are coping (or not).

### ***Developing a sense of belonging***

Feeling that it is ‘your university’ and that you belong there is an important element in success at this level. College life is renowned for its tribal commitment to each person’s particular college, accommodation block, and floor level, amongst other groups. Transferring that sense of belonging to a study group was an important driver in the development of Tues2Study, and has so far proved successful.

Being in a group, which has a shared goal of success helps to maintain the balance between work and play, while the interaction ensures a higher level of concentration and motivation. The commitment to meeting regularly to think and talk about study is a good discipline to ensure work gets done in time, while the constant interaction with fellow students in similar study patterns helps to sustain a common sense of purpose, mutual commitment and a sense of belonging.

### ***Caring about each other***

When one person starts to slip in motivation, the others can bring him/her back on track. It is very easy to get a bit behind, miss a few classes, and suddenly be completely lost. If someone is not around for a couple of days it is good to have friends who will check up and make sure s/he is okay. The table groups at Tues2Study have a regular cohort, and it is obvious when someone is missing. Even the ‘isolates’ tend to take a regular position, and if they start to miss the sessions, follow up by the academic mentors occurs.

### ***Developing trust***

Learning well requires a willingness to admit a lack of understanding, and to put forward half-formed ideas for discussion so that real understanding can be gradually constructed. This is hard to do with strangers. Having a supportive group to debate ideas without ridicule is a vital context for good learning, while having open discussion modelled by peers helps even the most reticent acquire skills in help-seeking.



### ***Working together***

Other students are a wonderful resource for making sense of important concepts, and to share some of the hard work. Sharing resources, critiquing ideas, providing feedback on each others' attempts at assignments, for example, will all make learning more effective and fun. Despite concerns about plagiarism it is very good practice to share understanding and resources, as long as students prepare their own final submission using their own interpretation of the discussions, and give due credit to others' ideas.

### **Learning from peers**

Explanations of difficult concepts from friends are often more effective at improving understanding than explanations from teachers. Similarly, explaining ideas to friends (who are not afraid to question) requires a lot of deep thinking that can help build a better understanding. Simply identifying poor understanding is also useful, while arguing about the real meaning of an idea is an effective way to eliminate misconceptions. Many of the interactions on the tables, including those with the roaming academic or SCR members, are group interactions, where there is considerable discussion about the advice being offered and how it should be applied.

The ability to work with others, thereby learning from peers, working together, sharing concerns and caring about each other, featured strongly in the Tues2study participants' responses about why they participated in, what they did at, and what they gained from Tues2study. Approximately a third of the total number of responses (140/489) in the survey was about working with others (see quotes in Tables 2, 4 and 6 above).

Approximately 45% (220/489) of the total responses indicated that Tues2study participants expected to get serious academic work done, that this happened and that they valued the gains they made in this respect. It is arguable that these responses also reflected a desire to work with others in a social setting because otherwise these students would study alone in their rooms (or not). A further 16% of the total responses were about the environment of Tues2study being attractive and motivating, as illustrated above. Altogether then, approximately 90% of the total number of responses indicates engagement with the learning community by the participants in the study. It is also worth noting that with each respondent being able to give up to three answers per question, none gave only responses related to socialising or simply eating cake (10% of total), meaning that ALL students who attended Tues2study on the evening of the survey achieved positive study outcomes as well as enjoying the interaction with peers and the free supper.

There is anecdotal evidence that the remaining features of learning communities, described above, - maintaining a sense of direction; developing a sense of academic standards; developing a sense of belonging and trust – are also features of Tues2study. Further more detailed research is indicated to confirm this. Also needing further research are the necessary conditions to support the Tues2Study model, such as the importance of academic support and mentoring for the student learning leaders, and the presence of at least some academic staff during Tues2Study.

The desire to participate in one's learning community in this way is a sign of involvement and engagement with that community which is a recognised factor in student retention (Astin, 1993; Nagda, Gregerman, Jonides, von Hippel, & Lerner, 1998; National Resource Centre for the First Year Experience and Students in Transition, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993). This fact is

being increasingly realised in Australia in recent times. The 2007 Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (Australian Council for Educational Research 2008, vii) uses six scales or descriptors to measure student engagement, three of which contain questions that acknowledge the value of learning communities: supportive learning environment; enriching educational experiences and student/staff interaction. The report presents the first insights into students' engagement in higher education in Australasia (Australian Council for Educational Research 2008, 1).

## Conclusion

The promotion of the college-based learning community as an alternative to more traditional, but clearly unattractive study skills lectures and workshops will remain on the agenda at UNE as one initiative aimed at increasing retention. It appears that layered, personal 'at the elbow' learning support and peer mentoring in a non-threatening, social environment is an appealing and effective learning support approach for the types of students described here and therefore a practical retention strategy. The Tues2study evening will continue to be promoted and supported and its results shared with the other residential colleges. It is hoped that the study evening trend will grow as tangible and measurable results such as improved student outcomes and retention become available. The 'at the elbow' approach to assisting students is also being introduced into the learning commons area of UNE's library where large numbers of (mainly non-residential) students congregate. While in the past the library has abided by the traditional 'quiet work' rule, this approach has been recently deliberately abandoned in the designated learning commons area of the library to promote a sense of shared and social learning.

The information presented here is transferable to situations in which young recent school leavers are living and learning together, and also to educational contexts in which non-traditional entry pathways mean that many young people are starting university study without being in possession of the types of cultural capital once taken for granted.

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