

Research to help students overcome study roadblocks

September 20 2017



Dr Louise Ainscough. Credit: University of Queensland

New research is helping academics understand factors hindering students from achieving academic success in the transition from secondary school to university.

The University of Queensland School of Biomedical Sciences researcher Dr Louise Ainscough identified five categories of learning hindrances experienced in the early weeks of their university course which could lead to students failing or withdrawing from study.

"These impediments included juggling study with paid work or family tasks, and struggling to balance their academic workload," Dr Ainscough said.

"They also reported difficulty understanding lecture materials, problems with concentration during lectures, and a lack of motivation."

Dr Ainscough said the study provided academics with some important clues on how to address first-year attrition rates.

"As students negotiate the different learning environments and expectations, we can ensure they reflect on their individual circumstances and recognise potential impediments," she said.

"Students can then take ownership of their learning, and we can help them to develop strategies to become successful, independent learners."

The study investigated the experiences of students who had failed a first-year course and passed in the second year, and those who failed courses in both years.

"Those students who turned around their academic performance were most likely to report a lack of understanding of the subject matter as the major obstacle to success," Dr Ainscough said.

"Their methods of overcoming that barrier included asking for help, investigating online resources, and spending more time reading and revising their text books.

"Students who failed in both years were often struggling to balance multiple study commitments, or balance study with social and work commitments."

The results suggest that cumulative impact could be as likely as a traumatic event to result in poor grades and possibly lead university students to withdraw from their course.

Dr Ainscough said students reported feeling overwhelmed by all the things they had to do, and were not able to adequately focus on their course materials.

"Academics should consider assessment tasks prompting students to regularly evaluate their understanding of learning material, so they are better able to cope with problems if they arise," she said.

"This could be invaluable to increase students' self-awareness of hindrances they are facing, and how these hindrances are impacting on their learning.

"It will also give educators a greater understanding of their students' issues."

Dr Ainscough said it is not uncommon for students to change their mind about what they are studying, or to choose to move into full-time employment.

"At UQ we offer a range of programs to help students succeed, focusing on areas such as academic preparedness, learning skills, time management and wellbeing."

The research is published in *Studies in Higher Education* journal.

More information: Louise Ainscough et al. Learning hindrances and self-regulated learning strategies reported by undergraduate students: identifying characteristics of resilient students, *Studies in Higher Education* (2017). [DOI: 10.1080/03075079.2017.1315085](https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2017.1315085)

Provided by University of Queensland

Citation: Research to help students overcome study roadblocks (2017, September 20) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-09-students-roadblocks.html>

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