Student program embeds skills that last a lifetime

A Young Australian of the Year and successful lawyers, doctors, teachers and social workers are living proof of the success of UniSkills.

The award-winning program helps first year undergraduate students from diverse backgrounds to make the transition to university life and continues to support them. And it has been going for 25 years.

UniSkills students include those from rural or remote areas; international students; students who are the first in their family to go to university; mature age students; students who have recently immigrated or speak English as a second language; students who travel long distances to university; students with medical conditions or disabilities which impact on their study; and students with family commitments. The program also supports students entering through alternative pathways such as UWay and Special Consideration, Broadway, Aspire and Fairway.

Sarah Evamy, UniSkills co-ordinator, said the program was launched in 1987 with the aim of assisting these students to succeed and remain at university.

“We had 30 students in 1987; this year, more than 570 students. Since its beginnings, about 6,700 students have benefitted from the comprehensive year-long program which provides academic, social and personal support,” she said. “Thousands of other students have benefitted indirectly from the developing range and depth of partner programs to UniSkills within Student Services.

“The success of the program has been judged by the higher retention rate of UniSkills students progressing from first to second year. Another measure of its success is that many UniSkills participants go on to become leaders in the program.”

UniSkills has been recognised at University and national level (winning an Australian Learning and Teaching Council Award in 2008), with other Australian universities adopting similar programs.

Akram Azimi, current Young Australian of the Year is one of many success stories from UniSkills.

“I am deeply indebted to the Flying Start Program. Not only was it a great way to learn about the university’s services but it doubled as a ‘welcoming party,’” he said.

“For a kid from a low-socio-economic non-English speaking background, this was exactly what I needed: a bold statement by the University that I belonged on campus. Looking back now, the friends that I made from this program gave me the confidence to fully immerse myself in the life of the campus – perhaps this is why I have been a full-time undergraduate for nearly eight years!”

Tongowona Brian Mutete has a Bachelor of Arts and has just completed a Master of Social Work at UWA.

“Having been educated in a third world country (Zimbabwe), the prospect of going to university was daunting. As a first year student in 2009, I decided to get myself as much help as I could so I enrolled for Flying Start, an orientation program run by UniSkills, and that
proved to be the wisest decision I have made,” Brian said.

“From my second year as a student I was given the opportunity to give back to the first year students and I became a UniSkills Leader.

“I have never forgotten how Sarah Evamy and the UniSkills team always kept their doors open for me to drop in.”

Courtney Taylor is studying graduate Medicine at Notre Dame. “I came from a country school to the big city and UniSkills was the platform from which my comfort, connection and confidence on campus was able to leap. The events and free study group sessions were both great fun and great support throughout the year and even now I pass on things I learnt from my study group leaders,” he said.

Gavin Knott found starting University knowing only a handful of people at UWA a daunting prospect. “So I signed up for UniSkills and it was the best decision I could have made!” said Gavin, who is now studying for his PhD in Biochemistry at UWA.

“Throughout my undergraduate years, I worked as a UniSkills volunteer where I got to provide the next generation of UWA students with the same brilliant experience. Through volunteering I gained the opportunity to tutor and mentor where I discovered my enthusiasm for teaching, something I incorporate into my work even now. I believe a lot of my success and passion for university can be attributed to the positive influence of UniSkills.”

Jesse Li graduated in Medicine and is now studying to be a surgeon. He has also studied at Harvard Business School.

But Jesse felt lonely when he arrived on campus from a northern suburbs public school. “UniSkills really helped me out. As well as showing me the ropes to university life, I made a whole heap of new friends, some of which I still keep in touch with now. I even made a few romantic connections through UniSkills! I gave back to the UniSkills program by becoming a leader of the Transition Support Program as well as a Study Group Leader. This was incredibly rewarding because I able to watch the younger students develop and grow,” he said. “My student days were truly the best days of my life.”

Rebecca Halse came to UWA from the country.

“In this strange new environment, 420 kilometres away from my hometown of Denmark, UniSkills became my guide: at once my mentor and academic tutor, career counsellor and social secretary, support network and friend,” she said.

“Later, conducting help classes and study tutorials, and taking part in the UniSkills Flying Start program for new undergraduates helped to foster my love of teaching and confirm my choice of future career.”

Rebecca now teaches at Shenton College. “I aim to provide my students with the same experience afforded to me by UniSkills: to think critically, to challenge opinions, to be creative, and to ask society’s big questions in a safe environment where there is someone there to catch you if you fall.”

Van Truong has a double degree in Law and Commerce and a position at PwC as a senior tax consultant.

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