Deakin’s Students Helping Students Best Practice

Connect, engage, achieve
Division of Student Life, Deakin University

Deakin’s Students Helping Students Best Practice has been developed by:

- professional and academic Deakin staff involved in various Students Helping Students programs
- Deakin students in a variety of learning, social and practical Students Helping Students roles.

1. Learning happens everywhere

Learning can involve remembering facts, understanding how to write an assignment or knowing how to solve accounting problems. However, there is much more to learning—it is also about figuring out how to work with others to resolve issues, how to interpret ideas that are expressed in unusual ways, how to listen to others and really ‘hear’ what they are saying, how to find possible answers to difficult questions, etc. Students Helping Students programs allow both helpers (you) and help-seekers to develop in these areas, and this greatly enhances study success as well as future employability.

2. Students need confidence to learn

University can be a very scary place for new students, and a large part of your role is to help students understand that no one starts out knowing how to be a university student—everyone has to learn how to be one: how to write, how to use CloudDeakin, how to reference, how to research, how to take exams, how to better understand expectations. Empathy and listening are important, and discussing some of the trials of learning how to be a student can help build confidence.

3. Students need to build on where they are at

Attending university is major. There is so much to know and figure out. How can anyone know it all, particularly newer students? You need to really listen to (and interpret) where the student is at: What do they know? What experiences are they bringing (or not)? Try to find out what they know to help them build a little on their knowledge to help them become better students and more independent learners. It may also be useful to find out why they are at Deakin—what goals do they have for studying? They may not know, but it can be helpful to explore the possibilities.

4. What the student says may not be the real issue

What is the student asking for help with? Many students’ real issues are quite different than what they think they are. One way to get to the real issue is to ask questions. Why? is a great question to get students to think more deeply about what they are after.

5. Deakin student diversity creates a range of needs and issues

Deakin students come with backgrounds and experiences that you could not possibly be familiar with: some are from different cultures, many have a first language that is not English, others live in remote areas, some who have not studied for many years, others must work full time to survive, and so on. This is where it is really important to ask questions, and the answers will often surprise you, and hopefully you will learn more than you ever imagined from the students you assist. You cannot empathise with students who have had a very different experience! Your role is to confirm that their feelings are valid and to learn how their situation is affecting them so you can best assist them.
6. **Help students become independent learners**
   Your role is to help students find their own answers. To do this, engage students in discussions, listen carefully, ask questions and rephrase what the student has said to check meaning. Of course, if the student simply wants to know where the café is and you know where it is, it may be best to answer directly! You have to use your judgement to decide how much—or how little—information will help the student become a more independent learner.

7. **It’s about the student—not you!**
   Ideally the student(s) you are assisting will talk a lot more than you. As a helper, you are good at and enthusiastic about many things, so you might find it very hard to not talk too much. However, your role is to find out about the student. You want to ask a lot of questions to get them talking. This can help you help the student to discover their ‘real’ issue, find out what they already know about a topic, let them ‘clear their chest’ of their issue by talking or help them to increase their confidence.

8. **Let the student keep control of their own issues**
   Try not to take over any student issues, problems or worries. Use your judgement to determine how certain/uncertain any advice or suggestions you give should be. For example, you may want to use ‘certain’ language to stress the importance of standard study processes, such as starting assignments early or referencing sources (e.g., “It is crucial to reference any ideas you get from sources.”). However, advice or suggestions are most effective when you keep the student in control by asking questions or using uncertain language to take the responsibility off your shoulders: This *appears* to be... This may... Is it possible that...? Have you thought about...? What if...? This is what works for me....

9. **The student’s success is not your responsibility**
   The student is 100% responsible for their own successes, and therefore ‘own’ any successes (or failures) they make. You are an objective, knowledgeable, outside helper who discusses, points out, asks questions, etc., but it is the student’s responsibility to make their own decisions and take (or not take) any action to change or do something.

10. **Celebrate uncertainty**
    You know things change all the time, so yesterday’s answer may not be accurate today. Even if you are 99.999999% sure you ‘know’ the answer, take care to qualify statements (e.g., Last week it was....It could be....Perhaps it...It may be possible...Have you thought about...? Have you looked at...?). Your role is to help them find *their* answer, not give them what you think is your answer!

11. **Know when and where to refer students**
    Part of celebrating uncertainty involves knowing when to direct students to another source. It’s not about handballing; it’s about helping students find the appropriate person, place or materials to help them find what they need. Keep informed about referral points, and if you are unsure, ask someone or help the student try to find out where to get the information.

12. **Know your boundaries**
    You are a student, but you are also a leader, mentor, helper, role model, and this can create boundary issues. In your helper role you are representing the University, so it is important to maintain a professional demeanour. It is also important to remember you are not a teacher or tutor, and sometimes students may need to be reminded of this. You are also not the students’ friend, so an appropriate ‘distance’ may need to be maintained.

13. **Continue developing and growing**
    Although you are trained to help students, that is just the start. Enjoy your role, forgive yourself any ‘mistakes’ and be aware that your own learning as a student helper has just begun.