

A regional university's approach to connect and prepare distance education students' transition to study

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Abstract

Southern Cross University's Connect and Prepare Project is an emerging initiative that seeks to foster an early positive connection with its growing cohort of distance education students. Early indications so far have shown that the new engagement activity is highly valued by the students. By meeting with staff and other students and receiving information and assistance at a critical time, distance students felt prepared, supported and inspired to commence study. Early data shows the new initiative may be reducing early attrition and promoting retention amongst the distance education cohort at Southern Cross University. The challenge now is how to enable the initiative's future sustainability and become embedded core university practice.

Background and context

Southern Cross University is a regional university playing a major role in widening the participation of people from underrepresented groups in higher education, with 25% of its students from low socio-economic backgrounds, 57% from regional and remote areas, and 4.2% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Students who study via distance education account for 35% of the University's student cohort. Consistent with high attrition rates across the sector of students studying by distance, retention rates of distance students studying at Southern Cross University are consistently below those of on-campus students. In an effort to both improve the transition experience and the retention rates of distance students at Southern Cross University, a new engagement initiative was developed to improve students' early transition experience to study. It sought to respond to the early transition needs of distance students, from both an academic and social perspective, by providing key information and assistance required to successfully begin study, as well as the opportunity to connect with peers, continuing students and University staff. Its particular focus was to connect with students from Low SES, regional and remote, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Backgrounds, and those first in family to study at University.

Rationale

Initial consultation through one to one meetings and focus groups with university academic and professional staff working with distance students, highlighted the importance of connecting early with students to ensure they received timely information and assistance in accessing university sites and resources to successfully begin study in week 1. Consistent with findings from Baik, Naylor & Arkoudis (2015), another key theme raised during initial consultation, was the need for the University to provide clear expectations to students as to what is expected of them in their particular course of study and what they can in turn expect from their lecturers

and the University - information that is generally provided to on-campus students in course information sessions during orientation week.

The Connect and Prepare Project was informed by Lizzio's Five Senses of Success Framework which proposes five areas of need are relevant to students' early success at university. These are: a sense of capability; a sense of connectedness; a sense of purpose, a sense of resourcefulness and; a sense of culture (Lizzio, 2006; Lizzio & Wilson, 2010). Studies have shown that connecting with other students and developing support networks enhances the student experience and develops "... a sense of community that is relevant in a distance education setting" (Tresman, 2002). The new initiative aimed to address factors of 'connectedness' and a 'sense of belonging' for students (Tinto, 1975; Lizzio, 2006; Kahu, 2014). Previous studies have identified the degree to which students felt prepared, both academically and emotionally for the transition to university, and the availability of appropriate academic and personal support at the transition stage, are main factors that influence student withdrawal/retention rates in their first term (Rickinson & Rutherford, 1995; Baik, Naylor & Arkoudis, 2015).

The engagement activity presented in this paper specifically focuses on the very early transition stage; the point where a student may be at risk of withdrawing early before any significant engagement and/or connection has occurred. Indeed since the initiative's inception, findings from a recently released report entitled *Opportunity through online learning: improving student access, success and retention in online higher education* affirms "strong agreement, across different universities, disciplines and areas of work, about the importance of early intervention, to realistically address student expectations and help them develop the academic and technology skills is necessary for online higher education" (Stone, 2016). Stone's (2016) study found: "Early contact and interventions with students, both pre- and post-enrolment enable an institution to: explore student expectations; provide a realistic picture of online study; facilitate appropriate academic preparation; improve early engagement; and build a sense of belonging to a learning community" (Stone, 2016, p. 2). One of the 10 National Guidelines developed by the study therefore recommends: "Intervene early to address student expectations, build skills and engagement" (Stone, 2016, p. 2).

Description of project

The engagement initiative was first piloted prior to the start of Southern Cross University's second academic session in 2015. Distance education students living in regional locations around Coffs Harbour, Kempsey and Grafton were invited to attend a special face-to-face orientation session. The sessions were specifically designed for students to meet other students studying by distance in their local area and to make a connection with University staff and student mentors. A total of 28 students across the three locations attended on the day. Student feedback was encouraging, showing they were keen to attend a face-to-face event which specifically focused on preparation for distance study.

Since the initial pilot, the engagement activity, 'Connect and Prepare for Distance Education Students' has run in Sessions 1 and 2, 2016 and Session 1, 2017. The geographical reach of the initiative has extended to include the large number of distance education students who live around all Southern Cross University's campuses. The student target group includes those who are admitted and enrolled or admitted only in an undergraduate bachelor degree program via 100% distance education and live within a 100km radius drawn around the Gold Coast, Lismore and Coffs Harbour Southern Cross University campuses, and the Grafton Study

Centre. It is hoped distance education students will continue to utilise the University Study Centre in Grafton for future engagement with staff and fellow students. Two weeks prior to Southern Cross University's Orientation week, students are personally invited by email (University email address and personal email address supplied at admission) and mobile text message using the University's Central Management System and Student Management System. Those not registered one week prior to the event, are sent a reminder email. All registered students are sent a short SMS reminder message of the upcoming event. Notice of the Connect and Prepare Event is also advertised on the University's Orientation website.

The engagement activity is facilitated by the project officer and one University librarian. At the start, students meet staff and other students informally. Current student mentors in the UniMentor program talk about their experience and the availability of the program to commencing students. UniMentors are experienced students who have overcome the challenges, both academic and social of starting university who offer support and assistance to students in their first session. Informed by the literature and feedback obtained from colleagues and current students, a computer-based activity focuses on areas students need to be familiar with as they transition to online study. These areas include: technology (accessing university sites); online learning site (Blackboard MySCU and Collaborate); and online library services. Although information about those areas are important, emphasis is given to practical hands-on experience and confidence building, as well as knowing where to go for ongoing support.

Students' feedback is sought about the session in general and whether the program's content meets student needs and expectations. A short questionnaire uses a combination of closed and open questions. The Likert Scale five point scale allows each student to express how much they agree or disagree with a particular statement. A response of "undecided" captures a feeling of neutrality. Firstly, students are asked how they feel post-session - the extent they agree or disagree with statements, such as, "I feel more confident to begin studying" and "I feel supported as a distance student". Then each section of the program is evaluated - Technology Services, MySCU learning site, Blackboard Collaborate and Library toolkit - to determine for example, whether information is communicated clearly and if students know where to get help and support in that area. The questionnaire concludes with four open questions providing an opportunity for further and/or deeper feedback from students about their reaction to the session – What excited or surprised them? What would have made it better? What other questions they still have? What they would tell others about the session?

In session 1, 2017, the engagement initiative was successfully trialled at Kempsey, Port Macquarie and Taree to specifically target the needs of Southern Cross University's remotely located distance students. These regional locations were selected due to notable clusters of distance students residing around these areas. Library staff joined the sessions via Blackboard Collaborate to demonstrate features of the online library.

Early Outcomes

To date, student attendance has been relatively strong across all locations representing close to 40 percent of the locally targeted distance education student population. Each session has garnered a high student feedback response rate ranging from 80 to 100 percent of those attending. Results show students are generally very happy and satisfied with all aspects of the session. Over 80 percent find the interaction very helpful, reinforcing that the opportunity to meet peers and staff face-to-face is extremely valuable at the critical time of transition to distance education study. Students' responses for statements about each topic area also showed

the session's content continues to provide relevant and clearly explained information required by new distance education students. So far four themes have emerged from student evaluation data: 1) students valued the face-to-face interaction; 2) students appreciated the hands-on nature of the session; 3) students enjoyed feeling more confident and supported; and 4) students highly recommended the event continue in the future. This sample of comments are typical of what students' have said they value most about the engagement:

"It puts a human kind face to the online experience" Survey response, Session 1 2016.

"Receiving information face-to-face made it far less daunting" Survey response, Session 2 2016.

"An excellent introduction to distance learning and helped make DE less intimidating." Survey response, Session 2 2016.

I'm confident due to attending. It's a great relief, I was a bit confused how I would manage it all! Survey response, Session 2 2016.

To assess what short-term impacts may be attributed to the engagement initiative, a review of the targeted distance education students' enrolment status at post-census date (week 4 of the session) is conducted. The results so far show those who attend the event are more likely to be enrolled in at least one unit when compared with students who were invited but did not attend. For example, 90 percent of students who attended the session 1 event in 2016 were still enrolled compared with 56 percent who were invited but did not attend. Furthermore, students are tracked the following session and the analysis of enrolment data has found students who attended the Connect and Prepare Event were more likely to be enrolled in one or more units post-census the following session, compared with those that were invited but did not attend.

Conclusion

The engagement initiative appears to meet the needs of new distance education students by covering important topics to help get started and settled into online study. Student feedback gathered after every session strongly indicates students feel supported and more confident to begin their studies knowing what to expect in the first weeks of the academic session. Evidence so far suggests this new initiative provides important support and feeling of connectivity at a critical time for Southern Cross University's distance education students. Incipient findings from the analysis of enrolment status post-census and the following session, suggest this initiative is having a positive influence on students' early transition to study and may be having a positive impact with regard to Southern Cross University's retention and attrition rates of its distance education student cohort.

Questions for discussion

1. How can an engagement activity (such as this) adequately cater to the growing diverse needs of students attending? (Student expectations about the knowledge and skills they will acquire at the session are varied. Notable range in expertise and skills and readiness for study).
2. How might staff resources and expertise be best utilised to enable the initiative's future sustainability?

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