The CSU Outreach Team: Building confidence, success and persistence amongst online learners

Peter Greening, Diane Middleton, Emma Gersbach
Office for Students, Charles Sturt University

Abstract

The orientation and support of online learners are key issues for many institutions with large online cohorts. The tyranny of distance combines with a range of demographic, behavioural and cultural aspects to make orientation and support of online learners more complex than it is for traditional internal cohorts. Students from low socio-economic backgrounds, students who are the first in family to experience university study, mature age students and other non-traditional university students present unique challenges to university support services. The Outreach Team at Charles Sturt University seeks to overcome these problems by providing face-to-face orientation for online students via a series of visits to cities and towns across Australia. These visits are supplemented by telephone and email support throughout the remainder of a students' candidature. Data analysis suggests that interaction with the Outreach Team has a positive impact on students' confidence, achievement, persistence and timely completion.

Introduction

Online and distance education students, hereafter referred to as online students, have traditionally had poorer progress and attrition results than their on-campus counterparts. The introduction of a demand-driven higher education landscape from 2012 resulted in an increase in the number of students from non-traditional backgrounds. These non-traditional backgrounds include elements such as students who are the first in family to study at university, students from low socio-economic backgrounds, and mature age students. Kemp and Norton (2013, p. 5) also note that many of these students are less well prepared than students previously admitted to higher education, and pose a substantial risk of attrition.

Charles Sturt University (CSU) is the largest regionally-based university in Australia, enrolling nearly 43,000 students from across Australia and more than 120 countries around the world. Approximately two-thirds of CSU's students study online. CSU has an over-representation of many types of non-traditional students, with approximately 22% coming from a low socio-economic status (LSES) background, 70% being first in family, and a large proportion of students being mature aged.

Since 2012, the Outreach Team has provided face-to-face, email and telephone-based support to students studying online. The team aims to provide targeted support at the point of enrolment and be available to provide support at other times during the students' candidature. This support includes face-to-face visits to towns and cities across Australia, as well as the provision of support from campus locations and several study centres across NSW. The Outreach Team has demonstrated a positive impact for online students who choose to interact with them. Institutional and survey data reveals increased student confidence, increased progress, reduced attrition and an increase in timely graduation.

Disadvantages

Online students, at least within the CSU context, differ demographically from our internal students. They are more likely than internal students to be older, more likely to be from a LSES background and more likely to be the first-in-family to attend university. These demographics, in conjunction with the fact that they are more likely to study part-time and have significant work and carer responsibilities that coalesce into an environment where it can become extremely difficult to be successful at university. Some of these factors are explored below.

Limited participation

In 2012 the Higher Education Participation rate in Central, Western and South Western NSW was 3.2%; one third lower than the state average and nearly 40% lower than for metropolitan areas. CSU has a strong commitment to improving participation rates within our footprint region and in particular supporting the success of enrolled students, many of whom study by online learning. Furthermore, there is a clear correlation between remoteness and attrition with CSU students studying online. Data indicated that CSU students studying by online learning from remote locations suffered a first year attrition rate of 30% across all courses, as opposed to a 13% attrition rate for on-campus students. This climbed to a 50% attrition rate after three years of study. Progress rates are also of concern for this group of students whose progress rates are 78.5% compared to 89% for on campus students.

First in family

Online learning has a significant role in widening access and participation in higher education for first-in-family students. "First-in-family is defined as those who are the first in their immediate family to undertake university studies including parents, siblings, partners and children" (Stone, O'Shea, May, Delahunty & Partington, 2016, p. 163). 51% of all higher education students across the Australian education sector are first-in-family students (O'Shea, 2016). International research suggests that students who do not have an immediate family member who has been to university are less likely to attend university and are also less likely to perform well academically once they are there (Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), 2010). It is critical that in order for these students to succeed that they receive ongoing support.

Low socio-economic status

Low socio-economic status (LSES) come to university needing to develop a whole gamut of skills. Online learning offers students, particularly those who are older with responsibilities of family and work, the opportunity they need to be able to study towards a university degree (Stone et al., 2016, p. 163). It is critical to support these students by delivering targeted programs (Devlin, Nelson, Kift, Smith & McKay, 2012, p. 5). Devlin (2010) also argues that LSES need more support than those from higher socioeconomic status. Therefore, Support services delivered in a timely manner provide opportunities for students to develop their academic skills in order to succeed.

Mature age

Mature aged students are more likely to attrit than their younger counterparts. Department of Education data demonstrates that commencing mature age students are around seven percentage points more likely to attrit than those under 25 years of age. Podesta-Meaney (2010, p. 4) point to a range of factors such as family and social commitments, work, and financial commitments as reasons why students do unsatisfactorily. Additionally, Bone and Reid (2013) point to both age, and time since high school, as factors that negatively affect a student's likelihood of being successful at study.

Difficulty in orientation for online students

Further to the difficulties based on student attributes, is the very act of orientation which is hampered by students' distance from the institution. Orientation is recognised as a process to enhance students' first year experience rather than an event (Tomei, Hagle, Rineer, Mastander & Scollon, 2011). Therefore, there is a need to be more strategic about supporting student transition into universities from enrolment due to "the heterogeneity of entering students' backgrounds; the well documented and changing patterns of student engagement; … and the sector's own transition from an elite to a mass education system" (Kift, 2008, p. 12).

Impact on cultural capital and preparedness to study

Each of the above factors contribute to a lack of relevant cultural capital and a lack of preparedness amongst many online students. Devlin (2013, p. 940) notes that students require this "cultural capital or familial experience with universities on which to rely to help them decode discourses and respond to implicit expectations within them." Many students make their decision to study, and commence their study without sufficient knowledge of the university systems and processes, as well as the requisite study skills to properly engage and be successful in study. Students studying via online may also lack the support network to quickly obtain this cultural capital, as an on-campus student might through social networks.

In addition, there is a need to alleviate information overload, avoid unnecessary bureaucratic procedures and address the lack of preparedness of many students to cope with their new tertiary environment (Kift, 2008, p. 12). Consequently, successful orientation programs have been linked with student retention that assist students in gaining the attitudes, knowledge, skills and opportunities that will assist them in making a smooth transition to the university community. Thereby allowing students to become engaged and productive community members that can endure academic demands. Gaskell (2006, p. 96) asserts that "orientation programs have been found to improve student retention in … distance education programs." Furthermore, it is the combination of academic and social integration during orientation that is critical for student success and retention (Braxton, 2002; Tinto, 2002).

The program

In March of 2012, Charles Sturt University's Outreach Team (then called the Regional and Remote Learning Support Team) began providing face-to-face support for online students. Initial venues where this support was provided included Moree, Broken Hill, Bourke and Griffith. The intention was to improve retention and progression rates for

distance education students studying in regional and remote areas of NSW through the provision of targeted, timely and accessible support. During the project it became clearly evident that all online students required targeted support in order to develop into effective learners.

Today, the student focused team has expanded to include four Student Liaison Officers (SLOs) who travel to 65 locations, and 5 campuses across all Australian states and territories. The Outreach Team is focused on meeting the educational and study needs of online students from various equity groups including; rural and remote, first-in-family to study at university, Indigenous, mature aged and LSES. Whilst travelling SLOs run group orientation workshops to assist students to navigate the online environment; understand the importance of research and academic writing; and locate available support services when required. Additionally, the Outreach team provide tailored one-on-one appointments for students to overcome their university fears and ask personal study related questions. The Outreach Team are aware of the importance of providing timely and easily accessible orientation information as well as ongoing support services to ensure a successful first year experience for online CSU students.

Additionally, the Outreach Team staffs an Outreach Centre in Sydney Olympic Park for online students. Staff at the Centre can assist students with orientation, preparing assignments, study skills, time management, online learning and building support networks and connections with other students in the area. Furthermore, CSU operates two Regional University Study Centres in Griffith and Parkes offering students a space to study, learn and participate in integrated business and education courses. The Centres consists of a partnership between CSU, the local Council and TAFE NSW. Students are offered free face-to-face support and assistance by the Study Centre Coordinator, and they have reciprocal user rights for the TAFE library. Students are also supplied with computers that have CSU connectivity and the Outreach SLOs visit regularly.

The Outreach Team are aware personally of the benefits and difficulties of studying online as most team members have studied online themselves. Rovai (2003, p. 14) highlights that "an unfamiliar learning environment" requires skills that non-traditional learners have not yet acquired. The Outreach Team are well equipped with these skills and are aware of feelings such as isolation, lack of confidence with learning, and the perceived lack of services by lecturers and support services. These challenges can affect how students classify their connectedness with the university and peers. Lidia confirms this when she stated, *"I would like to say thank you ... for taking the time to come out to Bowral and include us in the outreach program. Personally, being a distance education student I sometimes feel very isolated. It was nice to attend a 'Uni class' so to speak."* Students who connect with Outreach and engage in our services early in their studies, have the best chance of success as they are afforded skills and knowledge in order to succeed in their studies. They also are provided with opportunities to network with peers, thus removing isolation.

Over the course of the last five years, the Outreach Team has conducted a total of 622 visits to cities and towns around Australia. Locations visited are based on enrolled students from a region, where there is generally a substantial proportion of students from LSES locations. On these trips and via phone, email and skype appointments, the Outreach Team has had 7833 individual interactions with online students. All this data is summarised in the table below.

The CSU Outreach Team: Building confidence, success and persistence amongst online learners, Good Practice Report

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Activities Conducted	31	72	221	164	134
Interactions with students	946	1042	2180	1998	1667

Table 1: Breakdown of Outreach activity by year

Impacts and outcomes

The Outreach Team aims to have a positive impact on students' confidence, achievement, retention and completion. Our actual and perceived impact on these elements is investigated below.

Student confidence

The Outreach Team has consistently demonstrated a positive impact on students' confidence to study. Student self-reported confidence before and after interacting with the Outreach Team was captured by survey. Students reported generally low levels of confidence prior to interacting with the team. This seems to indicate that we are seeing the students that we aim to target, those students with low preparedness for study. Students tended to indicate a higher level of confidence after interacting with the Outreach Team, as evidenced by higher incidence of reporting that they were Confident, Very Confident or Extremely Confident after interacting with the Outreach Team.
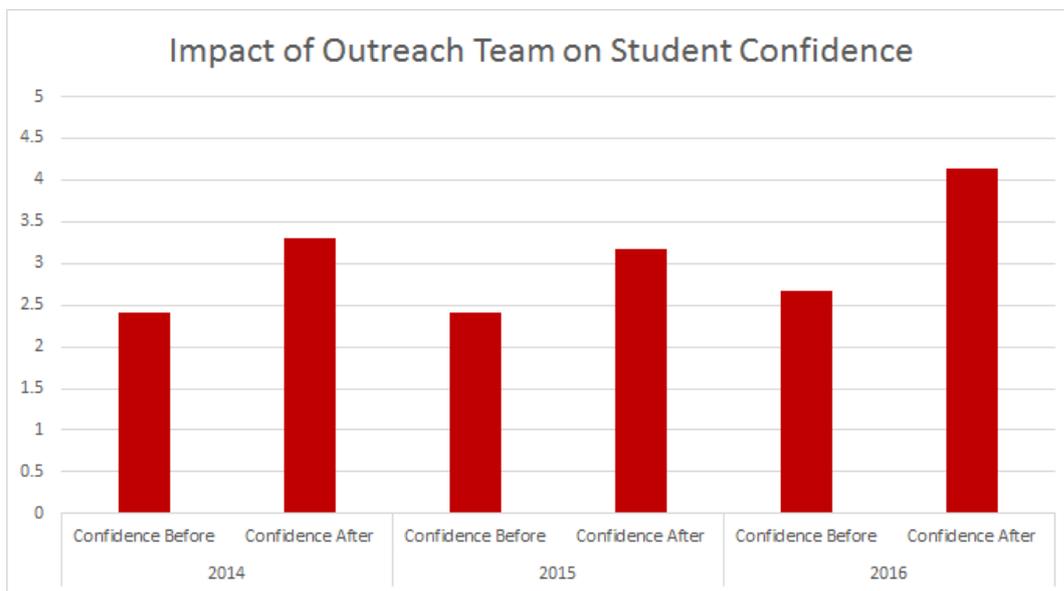

Figure 1: Impact of interaction with the Outreach Team on student confidence

Achievement

The average GPA of students who engage with the Outreach Team is consistently better than the average GPA for all commencing online Undergrad students. The magnitude of this difference varies each session, but is in the order of 0.82 - 0.18 points. This analysis was performed using data from student administration systems, comparing the GPA at the conclusion of a session for those students who interacted with the Outreach Team

with the average GPA of all commencing, undergraduate, online students. Note CSU uses a seven-point measure of GPA, with a PS mark being worth 4 points.
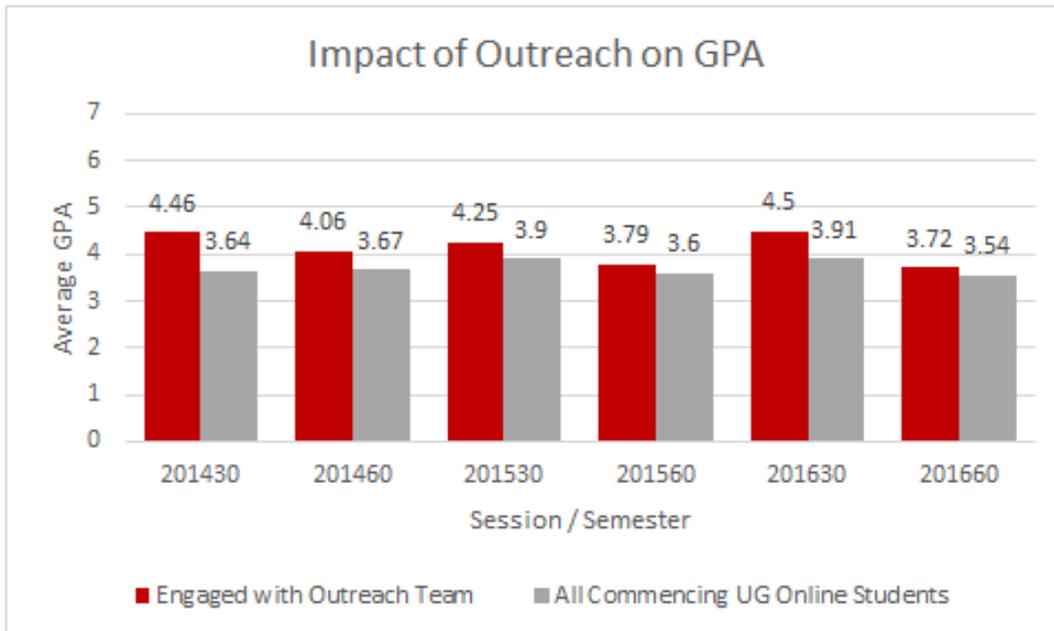

Figure 2: Impact of interaction with the Outreach Team on GPA

Retention

Students who interact with the Outreach Team have found to be less likely to withdraw from the institution than those commencing online students who do not interact with us. The self-reported impact of students' intention to stay demonstrates that the Outreach Team often have a substantial impact on students' decision to persist. It is noted that there is the possibility for some self-selection bias to affect this outcome.
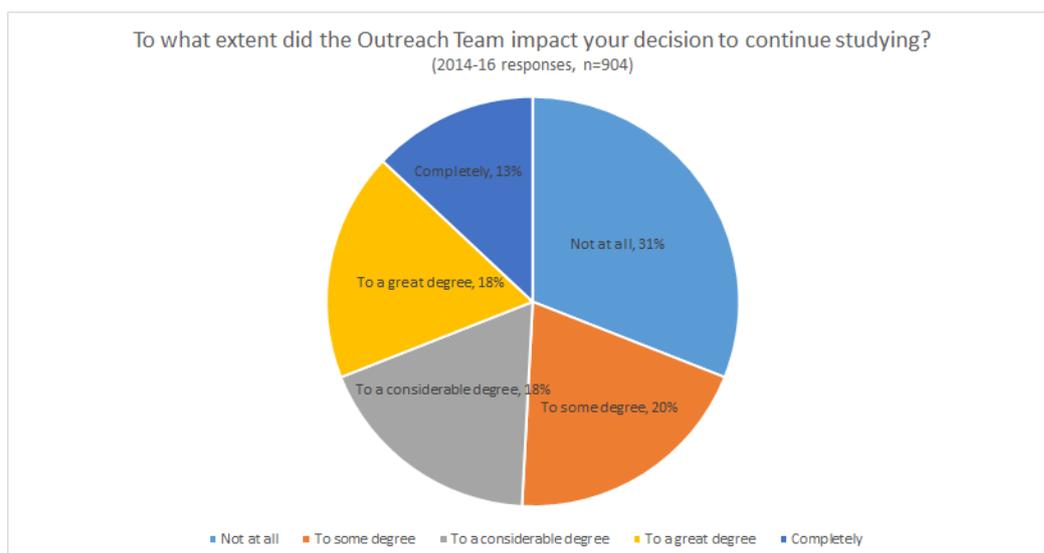

Figure 3: Impact of interaction with the Outreach Team on decision to persist with study

Completion

Longitudinal analysis has revealed that students who interacted with the Outreach Team in 2012 are four years later, less likely to have withdrawn, and those that are still enrolled have a significantly higher accumulation of subject points and a significantly higher average GPA than other online students who commenced in 2012.

Group	Average Subject Points	Average GPA
Control Group (n=6689)	75.58	4.31
Outreach Team (n=137)	110.29*	4.63*

Table 2: Comparison of subject points and GPA for students who interacted with the Outreach Team
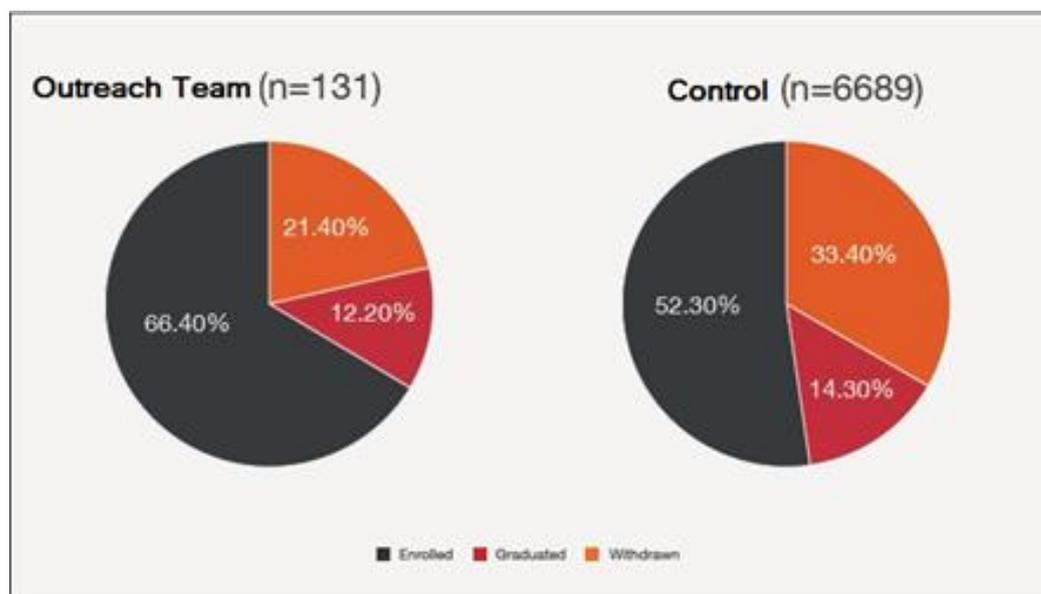

Figure 4: Impact of interaction with the Outreach Team on progress towards completion

Transferability to other educational settings

The Outreach Team initiative is easily transferable to other distance education settings for all learners. Our approach supports the view that not all students are comfortable using online support services even though they are enrolled to study online. This is particularly evident with vulnerable students. Therefore staff working with online students need to be aware of the differing needs amongst their cohort. For example; online students heavily rely on effective time management skills to organise their busy work, family and study schedules. Additionally, online students lack the face-to-face support services typically offered to internal students. Unfortunately, students are not aware of the information they do not know. Hence, the reliance of students on services such as Outreach to answer questions, provide support and to direct student to appropriate service

options. Furthermore, by providing face-to-face interactions allows students to better receive support, build academic skills and solve problems. This allows us to establish a connection with students, enabling them to feel comfortable to seek repeat support resulting in reduced attrition rates.

References

Braxton, J. M. (ed.) (2002). *Reworking the student departure puzzle.* Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.

Bone, E., & Reid, R. (2013). First course at university: Assessing the impact of student age, nationality and learning style. *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education, 4*(1), 95-107.

Devlin, M. (2010). Non-traditional university student achievement: Theory, policy and practice in Australia. Keynote Address 13th Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference, 27–30 June 2010

Devlin, M. (2013). Bridging socio-cultural incongruity: Conceptualising the success of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds in Australian higher education. *Studies in Higher Education, 38*(6). 939-949.

Devlin, M., Nelson, K., Kift, S., Smith, L., & McKay, J. (2012). Effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds: Resources for Australian higher education. Retrieved from http://www.lowses.edu.au/assets/ALTC%20LSES%20Final%20Report%202012.pdf

Higher Education Funding Council for England. (2010). Trends in young participation in higher education: core results for England. Retrieved from http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/hefce/content/pubs/2010/201003/10_03.pdf

Gaskell, A. (2006). EDITORIAL Rethinking access, success and student retention in Open and Distance Learning, Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning, 21:2, 95-98

Kemp, D., & Norton, A. (2013). *Review of the Demand Driven Funding System.* Retrieved from https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/review_of_the_demand_driven_funding_system_report_for_the_website.pdf

Kift, S. M. (2008). The next, great first year challenge: Sustaining, coordinating and embedding coherent institution–wide approaches to enact the FYE as "everybody's business". Retrieved from http://eprints.qut.edu.au/14401/1/14401.pdf

Luzeckyj, A., King, S., Scutter, S., & Brinkworth, R. (2011). The significance of being first: A consideration of cultural capital in relation to "first in family" student's choices of university and program. A Practice Report. *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education, 2*(2). 91-96.

O'Shea, S. (2016). Engaging families to engage students: Exploring how university outreach activities can forge productive partnerships with families to assist first-in-family students navigate their higher education journey. Retrieved from http://www.oltconference2016.com.au/cms/uploads/sarah%20oshea.pdf

O'Shea, S.E., May, J. & Stone, C. (2015). Breaking the Barriers: supporting and engaging first-in-family university learners and their families. Retrieved from http://ro.uow.edu.au/sspapers/2333/

Podesta-Meaney, B. (2010). *Under Pressure: The First Year Experience of Mature Age Students.* Retrieved from http://uwa.edu.au/__data/assets/rtf_file/0008/1886867/Podesta-Meaney_Paper.rtf

The CSU Outreach Team: Building confidence, success and persistence amongst online learners, Good Practice Report

Stone, C., O'Shea, S., May, J., Delahunty, J. & Partington, Z. (2016). Opportunity through online learning: Experiences of first-in-family students in online open-entry higher education. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning, 56* (2), 146-169. Retrieved from http://web.b.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.csu.edu.au/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=4&sid=e3e76b3f-d9e2-40b9-b735-9b937c4b466b%40sessionmgr107&hid=123

Tomei, L.A., Hagle, H., Rineer, A., Mastander, L.A., & Scollon, J. (2011). Do orientation materials help students successfully complete online courses? In Lawrence Tomei Online Courses and ICT in education: Emerging practices and applications. New York: Information Science Reference.

Tinto, V. (2002). *Leaving College: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.