

BASE+: An emerging initiative for supporting BA students.

Margaret Forster, Heather Aguilar, Evangeline Dunn, Murray Kirk & Tali Lavini
College of Humanities & Social Sciences, Massey University

Abstract

In 2016 at Massey University, New Zealand a BA student engagement project, BASE+, was delivered for the first time to facilitate the first year experience, student success and retention. The initiative was part of a wider project to refresh the BA and ensure that it remains relevant to the 21st century. This paper reports on the emerging initiative particularly the strategic vision, goals and importance of relationships for delivering support services to BA students. Key questions emerge as to how to capitalise on the momentum of the project and how to expand the project beyond the first year experience.

Why develop a student engagement project?

This emerging initiative is a response to an external academic review (The Arts Qualification Review Working Party, 2014) and internal feedback from students (Massey University Student Experience Survey, 2014) that identified the need for more integrated student support systems and services at Massey University (Massey). Student's indicated a particular interest in more personal interaction from the university and connections with others, more opportunities to know about what is happening, to be involved, an integrated and holistic experience, and more knowledge of where to find help (Massey University Student Experience Survey, 2014).

Massey currently provides a comprehensive set of services with good client satisfaction rates, however, many students are unaware of the services and/or do not proactively access services as required. For example, students regularly provide an excellent rating for library services however overall student awareness of library services is not high.¹ The assumption is that if awareness is increased then this could have positive implications for student success. Another example comes from a Massey Student Life Coordinator who noticed that orientation events have the highest attendance rates when the events are actively promoted and supported by academics and the College. This example suggests that teaching teams could play a pivotal role in making students aware and connecting students to support services. Both of these examples points to the importance of an integrated approach. How to achieve this approach has been the focus of the emerging initiative reported in this paper.

Facilitating Student Success

¹ "our main problem is trying to get students aware of what we have to offer" - Noeline White

Issues with student awareness of and access to support services are not unique to Massey and other tertiary institutions also find this challenging. Research stresses the importance of tailored and integrated services to ensure relevancy and effectiveness, and coupling the learning experience to support to reinforce positive help-seeking student behaviors (see for example, Britto & Rush, 2013; Kahu, 2013; Kezar & Kinzie, 2006; Kift, 2008; Scevak Southgate, Rubin, Macqueen, Douglas, & Williams, 2015). Drawing on these ideas the BA Student Engagement project (BASE+) was initiated by the College of Humanities and Social Sciences (CoHSS).

BASE+ is a physical and virtual student engagement project that connects students to each other, the College and critical student support services. It is part of a wider project that seeks to refresh the Massey BA and ensure it remains relevant and engages with contemporary audiences and issues. To achieve this five new compulsory courses have been introduced that develop skills in critical thinking, communication and problem-solving. The core courses introduce students to new ways of making sense of the world by challenging their assumptions and ideas and encourage use of their intellect and imagination to solve complex local and global issues. The focus on the local and the global embraces the College's strategic vision and goals of 21st century citizenship to produce engagement, informed, ethical citizens who are agile and adaptable, and able to make a difference; to transform the world and contribute to society in positive and meaningful ways.

It is this vision that underpins the way BASE+ is conceptualised and implemented. For example, issues of identity, culture and citizenship are central themes in the core curriculum. These are also embedded into the strategic vision of BASE+ through five key goals: to *connect*, to create a sense of *belonging*; to develop an arts *community* or culture; to develop a sense of student *ownership*; and, to facilitate student *agency*.

The goal to connect refers to the regular, personal interactions required to understand the drivers that motivate students personally, and identify what strengths can be drawn upon to contribute to a successful transition to university. The belonging goal involves recognising the value each individual brings to the shared BA experience. Developing a BA culture therefore involves creating an environment of growth and acceptance where individuals feel welcome to contribute and participate. The ownership goal encourages students take an active role in the College and wider university in particularly through setting the direction and participating in the BASE+ community. Finally, the agency goal is where students realise the benefits of making informed deliberate choices about their study through the assistance of targeted resources and support.

These goals are placed alongside the Massey Student Success Framework to direct our efforts and guide our practices in relation to student engagement and student support services. The Massey Student Success Framework is based on a lifecycle approach that recognises student experience is shaped by multiple internal and external factors (academic, social, cultural, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, occupational and physical) and influenced by multiple actors (student contact personnel, teachers, student support services, faculty, peers, family) within and outside of the institution (Shillington, Brown, MacKay, Paewai, Suddaby, & White, 2012). The Massey Student Success Framework provides a means of identifying student entry and exit points, potential interventions and determining when interventions should be delivered, who should be delivering them and how effective these have been. There are six key phases - thinking about study, making choices, enrolment, first weeks, progression and completion. Generally,

student success at Massey is facilitated at the course level through designing for engagement in and beyond the classroom by focusing on “appropriate course choice, early identification of vulnerable students and continuous proactive support” – the latter which can be provided by teaching staff, student support services and peers (Shillington et. al., 2012, p. 69).

BA Student Engagement Project (BASE+)

BASE+ was offered at Massey for the first time in 2016. There are a range of initiatives that are offered through BASE+. In the first year of operations initiatives were targeted at the first year experience particularly priority learner groups including Māori, Pacifica, distance and international students. This decision responds to evidence indicating preparedness for university is an issue, particularly for specific cohorts, and that support programmes and pedagogy can assist to mitigate this (see for example Kahu, 2013; Scevak et al, 2015). In time initiatives will be expanded to target support for progression through a programme.

The following matrix indicates how the strategic vision and goals of BASE+ and the Massey Student Success Framework come together to guide student engagement and student support services for Massey BA students. The matrix and associated initiatives will be the focus of the STARS presentation.

STUDENT SUCCESS FRAMEWORK	THINKING ABOUT STUDY	MAKING CHOICES	ENROLMENT	FIRST WEEKS	PROGRESSION	COMPLETION
PRIMARY BASE+ RELATIONSHIPS	External Relations	External Relations Student Admin	Student Admin Teachers	Student Life Services Teachers	Centre of Teaching & Learning Teachers	Careers and Employability Teachers
CONNECTING	BA marketing	BASE+ Starter	BASE+ Preparation	BASE+ initiatives	BASE+ initiatives	BASE+ initiatives
BELONGING						
CULTURE						
OWNERSHIP						
AGENCY	BA myth busting campaign	Taster videos	Course advice promotion	Engagement tracking	Engagement support	Student evaluation
DEVELOPMENT AND MAINTENANCE OF RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH THE PROVISION OF FACE, SPACE, PLACE.						

The first row (green cells) of the matrix lists the six key phases of the Massey Student Success Framework - thinking about study, making choices, enrolment, first weeks, progression and completion. The second row (yellow cells) is a list of primary relationships BASE+ has built with university support services to deliver specific initiatives to BA students. The third row lists the five BASE+ goals (connecting, belonging, culture, ownership & agency) and some examples of initiatives and interventions that were trialled in 2016. The final row (blue cells) emphasises the importance of relationships for delivering initiatives in terms of how BASE+ operates.

Relationships are conceptualised in three ways as a face, space and place. For example, BASE+ is the *face*, the embodiment of the College's commitment to develop lasting supportive relationships with its students through a student engagement strategy and project, and employment of engagement facilitators. Second, BASE+ is a *space* where a series of activities and opportunities are offered. These initiatives realise BASE+'s vision and five key goals and ultimately reinforce the central themes of the core curriculum of identity, belonging and citizenship. Lastly, BASE+ is a *place*, a physical and digital site which BA students can identify as their own. The face, space and place form a place to stand or a tūrangawaewae.

Tūrangawaewae is a Māori concept that can be translated as a place to stand and refers to the tribal territory of Māori people where one has the right of residence and belonging. The use of the term in relation to BASE+ emphasises that BASE+ is a space and place where BA students belong, where they can exercise their rights to educational success and realise the obligation and responsibility to be active and meaningful members of the college, the university, their communities and the wider New Zealand society.

A tūrangawaewae for Massey BA students requires a point of physical connection, an interpersonal connection and an intellectual connection. These connections are critical for weaving together student support services that caters directly to the unique needs of the 21st century Massey BA student. What we have learned is that once the connection is established, and the threads (of various services) brought into alignment with a shared direction, the opportunity to stand together and form a community is realised.

In relation to *place* BASE+ provides both a physical and digital site which BA students can identify as their go-to location. Massey is a multi-campus university so in Manawatū and Albany we offer a physical space where BA students are able to study, use the facilities, establish dialogue with other students, offer development sessions, and other activities conducive to helping BA students have a positive learning experience. Online, we have created a community site in our Moodle platform called the BASE+ Common Room, as well as a Facebook group for our students. Although, we have had varying degrees of success in each location we are hopeful that the level of engagement we have achieved in our Facebook group and the Manawatū Campus can be duplicated overtime in Albany and on the Moodle platform.

The *face* dimension refers to the interpersonal connection and embodies the CoHSS commitment to actively support all BA students. BASE+ is a four person team, working the equivalent of three full-time positions. As the face of BASE+ the team support student transition by organising programme based events during orientation and throughout the semester. The team collaborates with lecturers and other university services to ensure an integrated approach to student support. Another key 'face' in this mix is that of the students. Student involvement in projects is critical for ensuring services are relevant and for reaching other students.

The *space* dimension is conceptual and relates to making the time in one's mind (both the teachers and the students mind) to make the connection between the various activities and opportunities available and the long term benefits of participation or engagement; allowing the space to grow. The priority is engendering a culture shift amongst our students, a shift away from reactionary support seeking towards proactive strategic self-development.

Reflections

BASE+ has now been running for 10 months. During this time we have seen the beginnings of a vibrant and supportive community amongst BA students that has the potential to engender success and improve retention through an improved learning experience. Relationships with both staff and students are crucial to the ongoing and sustained success of BASE+. These relationships can be conceptualised through the Māori concept of *tūrangawaewae* as a place, face and space. From these connection points the relationships are able to be strengthened through the interweaving of diverse services and perspectives to facilitate student success.

Whilst we are still in the early stages of delivery, this year we have been inspired by the gains we have achieved and the lessons we have learned as we have sought to refine our approach. Next year will be a year of consolidation and also growth as we nurture our existing community and also introduce BASE+ to a new cohort.

For Massey BASE+ represents a significant departure from business as usual. It has required new investment, rethinking how services connect and collaborate and placing the student in the centre of the learning experience.

We now have a couple of questions for you to consider: how do we capitalise on the momentum of the project and how do we expand the project beyond the first year experience?

References

- Britto, M., & Rush, S. (2013). Developing and implementing comprehensive student support services for online students. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 17(1)29-42.
- Kahu, E. (2013). Framing Student Engagement. *Studies in Higher Education* 38(5) 758-773
- Kezar, A., & Kinzie, J. (2006). Examining the ways institutions create student engagement: The role of mission. *Journal of College Student Development*, 47(2), 2006: 149–172.
- 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”. In *Proceedings 11th International Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference*. Hobart AU.
- The Arts Qualification Review Working Party. (2014). *Redesigning the BA: Recommendations for the pro vice-chancellor*. Palmerston North: Massey University.
- Scevak, J., Southgate, E., Rubin, M., Macqueen, S., Douglas, H. and Williams, P. (2015.) *A Guide for Educators in Higher Education: Responding to diversity for positive academic outcomes*. Newcastle, AU: The University of Newcastle Australia.
- Shillington, S., Brown, M., MacKay, A., Paewai, S., Suddaby, G., & White, F. (2012). Avoiding the goulash: Closing gaps and bridging distances. *Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning*, 27:1,65-80.