

# USC Starting@USC Toolkit - engaging new students early.

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## Abstract

*In 2016, the University of the Sunshine Coast partnered with the Regional Universities Network to review and recalibrate its Starting@USC Toolkit and create a User Manual as a shared resource for member institutions. The Toolkit is designed as a simple on-line self-assessment tool to assist students to connect with relevant information and support as they get started with their studies at USC. It is an integral component of USC's multi-faceted transition strategy that aims to engage with students as early as possible in their learning journey. Toolkit responses are available to form the basis for personalised follow-up contact from the Student Success team. The responses also provide an invaluable source for the on-going development of timely and relevant orientation and transition-related information, communications and Support for Learning activities.*

## Student Engagement at USC

The University of the Sunshine Coast (USC) is a small, multi-campus, regional university and is a partner in the Regional Universities Network (RUN). In 2016, USC participated in a project to collaborate and share resources which have a transferable benefit for RUN institutions. Funding was made available to review and recalibrate USC's existing Starting@USC Toolkit and create a User Manual as a shared resource for member institutions. The transferable benefits of *Toolkit*, originally designed as a survey instrument, include: a systematic approach to understanding commencing student needs; the capacity to prioritise contact for 'at risk' students; and provision of a basis for monitoring and evaluation of engagement efforts without the need for sophisticated software or analytics engines.

To this end, USC's Starting@USC Toolkit was reviewed to deliver a more efficient instrument with improved communication objects; re-calibrate the rankings and prioritisation of students 'at risk' of disengagement; and produce a User Manual for distribution to RUN members. Whilst, developed as a regional-specific resource, the use of a systematic approach to student engagement and transition in the first year, the 'Toolkit' is a useful device for all institutions seeking to improve the first year experience of students.

Commonly, institutions adopt student engagement and retention strategies which aim to identify ‘at-risk’ students, to intervene and support their retention and success through targeted resources and support. The Early Alert Program at the University of New England; the Student Success Program at Queensland University of Technology; the JumpSTART Program at Curtin University, and the First-Year Experience Program at Auckland University of Technology (Nelson and Creagh, 2013) demonstrate the diversity of approaches employed. The University of Sydney deploys an academic buoyancy tool, the Motivation and Engagement Scale (MES) to guide individual, tailored support for students (Barnes and Coordinator, 2015) and the Starting@USCToolkit, has adapted elements of each of these approaches.

### **What is the Starting@USC Toolkit?**

Originally based on the AUT START initiative, the Toolkit, as a transition device, builds the capacity of students to navigate change (Gale and Parker, 2014) by seeking their views on their individual preparedness for study. It encourages commencing students to make a realistic appraisal of their circumstances and, with assistance from the university, set feasible goals to be achieved both before Orientation and during the early semester transition period, building self-regulation skills through the process.

*“The capacity to self-regulate is especially salient during periods of transition to new contexts where students’ habitual study strategies’ responses may not be sufficient to ensure success.”* The process of self-regulation, conventionally applies to mastering the transition to effective learning and *“involves students in a related sequence of actions starting with making a realistic appraisal of their circumstances, and from this to setting feasible and appropriate goals”* (Lizzio and Wilson, 2013, p.110). This also applies to the mastery of student self-management of all aspects of their studies.

The Toolkit is a simple instrument designed to allow students commencing their studies at USC to self-assess their expectations and preparedness for study. Invitations to complete the Toolkit are issued within one week of the student’s acceptance of their study offer. Students who complete the Toolkit receive a personalised email response which guides them to information and services relevant to their needs. Respondents may elect to opt in for early contact from the Student Success team. Other general welcome calls made by the Student Success team are prioritised by the scaled responses from the Toolkit to support transition into study.

The Toolkit is not intended to be a stand-alone institutional data-gathering instrument. Rather, it is designed to offer a self-assessment and information resource for new students that forms an integral part of the suite of engagement and transition activities at the University of the Sunshine Coast. In addition, the innovative development of the Toolkit in USC’s Customer Relationship Management System provides a more functional and user-friendly web interface and allows ready access to responses for prioritised follow-up, relevant referral and reporting purposes.

## **Creating a Toolkit**

The Project team undertook a review of the original Starting@USC Survey instrument functionality and content in order to develop a more efficient instrument with improved communication objects. In undertaking this review, consideration was given to identifying opportunities for development and integration with existing student systems – Campus Solutions (PeopleSoft – Student Information System) and Oracle Service Cloud (Customer Relationship Management System - CRM).

A detailed analysis of the 2015 Toolkit responses and attrition outcomes was also undertaken. The purpose of this analysis was to verify the appropriateness of both the instrument and the scoring/risk ratings attached to the responses.

The questions and responses were reviewed to remove items that did not resonate with students or have an obvious relationship with retention. The scoring calibration was revised to ensure consistency across all intervention tasks and activities to allow a holistic evaluation of early engagement efforts.

## **The Instrument**

The new instrument which went live for 2017 USC Commencing students in September 2016 includes improved design of communication objects, a more user-friendly and accessible web interface that is optimised for use on mobile devices, creation of related follow-up Tasks and Incident referral in the CRM and flexible and comprehensive reporting functionality.

Toolkit invitations are sent within one week of acceptance of the student's offer. Promising results are already indicated, with a 43% response rate for the contact and approximately 20% of respondents opting in for an early outbound contact from the Student Success team.

Students are asked a range of questions which are grouped according to aspirations and motivation and preparedness to study. These include:

1. What is the main reason you decided to study at USC?
2. Where will you be attending classes this semester?
3. How confident are you that you will successfully complete your courses in your first year?
4. Do you have a clear goal for the type of work you'd like to do after you finish studying?
5. During the semester, will you be in paid employment?
6. How many hours per week do you plan to spend on your study (including lectures, tutorials and private study)?
7. Will you have your own computer and internet connection?

University involves a number of academic skills that are important for successful completion of your assignments or assessments and your qualification. Consider some of the skills that are required at university. How confident are you with the following?

1. critical reading, referencing and note-taking skills
2. numeracy skills (e.g. algebra, mathematics)
3. writing skills (e.g. essay and/or report writing)
4. computer skills
5. asking questions and seeking help when you need it
6. presentation and oral communication skills

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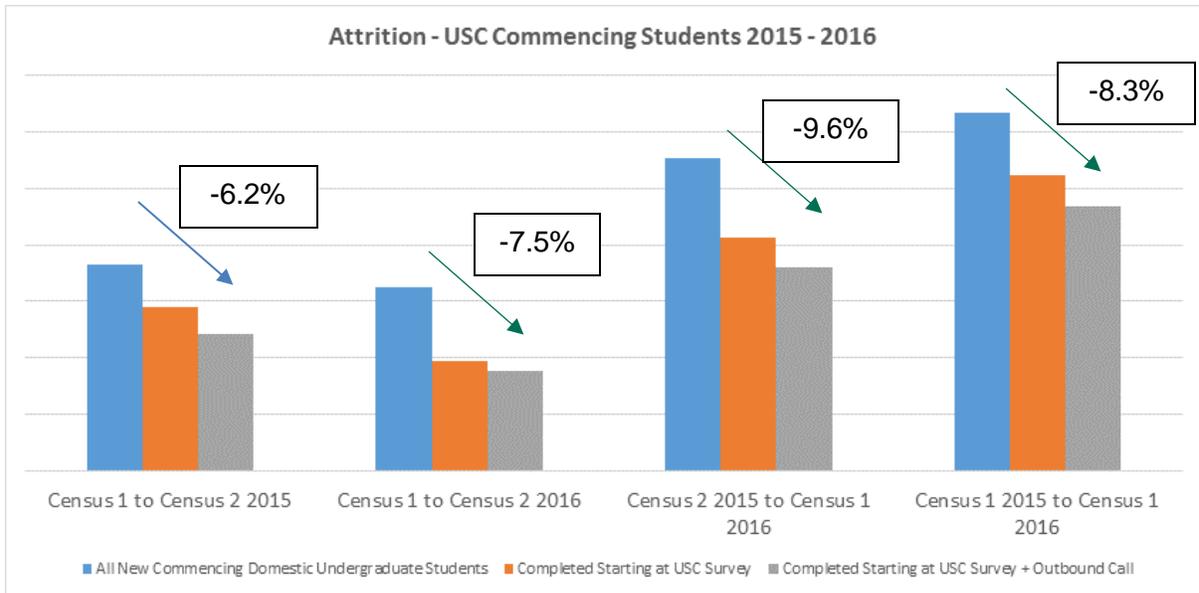
The Toolkit response allows early outbound call engagement to be personalised and responsive to the student's specific questions and concerns. In many cases, this is the first person-to-person contact students have with the University, which provides an invaluable opportunity to create a positive and caring first impression.

Feedback collected from the Toolkit responses also provides a solid evidence base for planning Support for Learning, Orientation and other transition-related communications, events and interventions.

### **Progress to date**

The retention outcomes of the 2015-2016 Toolkit are indicating positive support for the usefulness of the strategy. Students who responded were retained at a higher rate (i.e. lower attrition) after one year than the overall cohort of new students (See Table 2 below).

Integrating the Toolkit responses as the basis for personalised follow-up contact from the Student Success Team is proving to be most effective. The retention of students who completed the Toolkit and engaged with the outbound phone contact from the Student Success team was 8.3% higher for the period from Census 1 2015 to Census 1 2016, demonstrating that a systematic approach to engaging with new students can be both simple and effective.



### Key Questions for Consideration

1. How early is too early to effectively engage with commencing students?
2. What does pre-teaching engagement look like at your institution?
3. What do you see as the benefits or pitfalls of a toolkit approach to early engagement?

### References

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