NavigateMe: A personalised online tool bridging students to success

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Abstract

NavigateMe is an online self-help tool that provides immediate and personalised information based on students' responses. It encourages students to reflect, and assists them to seek ways to achieve their greatest potentials. Students use the tool for various reasons at different times throughout their academic year, however there is a need to further empower students to take action and continually reflect on their situations for improvements. A personalised dashboard that visualises student progress and future actions will be included in 2017. It aims to assist students identify their gaps in performance and empowers them to reflect and take actions to achieve better educational outcomes. The tool is continually reviewed and enhanced through feedback, surveys and web analytics. Further discussions on ways to engage with students at the right time with relevant information, and the use of evidence-based approach to evaluate services will be valuable to services.

Introduction

Student support is one of the key aspects to educational outcomes. To enhance student retention and success, support services should work in collaboration with faculties (Tinto, 2005), be flexible, responsive and interactive (McGorry, 2003). To enhance student educational achievements (Morisano, Hirsh, Peterson, Pihl, & Shore, 2010; Potter & Bye, 2014), support services need to assist students reflect on their personal goals. However universities —particularly the established traditional institutions— have a lack of clear effective pathways by which students can seek assistance with their emotional or support needs (Laws & Fiedler, 2013). Student Service staff and Faculty Advisors also report that students usually do minimal initial independent preparation in reflecting on their circumstances prior to face-to-face consultations.

There is a clear need for a tool that assists students reflect their current situation before seeking face-to-face advice, avail themselves of opportunities and seek support when needed. An UNSW online tool, NavigateMe was therefore developed to connect students to relevant faculty information and support resources. However help-seeking can be challenging especially for those who are seeking help for the first time and those who are most in need. An online self-help tool was therefore developed to provide a secure and familiar platform which has minimal threats to self-esteem for students to seek support, which are key to promote help-seeking behaviour (Karabenick, 2004; Ryan, Shochet & Stallman, 2010).

NavigateMe – an online tool that provide personalised information to students

The UNSW NavigateMe online tool is a new initiative that bridges students to relevant information based on individual responses. It encourages reflection and empowers users through guided steps to create an action plan that connects students to a mix of assisted and

self-accessed resources for support. It was designed to support students expand their potential and overcome difficulties during their university life.

The tool is accessible via a link on the UNSW website and is also featured on UNSW webpages with key information on academic performance. It is also highlighted in email correspondences at key points in time, for example when enrolment opens, during mid-semester when major assignments are due, and if students failed more than 50% of their enrolled courses. Users log in using their university login and password just as they do for all other university webpages. This provides students a familiar and safe platform to seek help.

After students are logged on, they select the faculty and residency to obtain specific information. Information is presented under five categories: "My Personal Life", "My Life at Uni", "My Career", "My Study at Uni" and "My Uni Procedure" (they can choose any number of these), and under each category are a list of sub-categories. "I" statements are then presented one at a time under each sub-category to encourage reflections. An example statement is "I'm interested in a program that develops my leadership skills". Students then choose "Tick" or "Cross" depending on whether they feel the statement is applicable to their current situation. Users can skip through sub-categories and questions, and a progress bar is visible at the bottom of the webpage to help students navigate through the statements.

Based on student responses, a personalised action plan is generated to provide immediate and individualised feedback. The action plan appears on the screen, and can be printed or emailed to the student. It consists of advice and links to other sites offering advice, which are sorted under two headings "to read" (links to explanations), and "to see" (people to consult, such as administration staff or counsellors depending on the problem). Students are provided with targeted and personalised information related to their individual needs at various stages of their university careers, and encouraged to take actions and to seek further support from staff if required.

All action plans created are saved under the personal profile of the student and students are assured that information will not be shared with other services across university. This provides a sense of security to students with little perceived threats to self-esteem when seeking help, and act as the first port of call for students to seek help when needed. Students can also log on to the tool in later stages to access previously saved action plans and tick the "Completed" checkbox under each advice offered in the action plan to track their actions.

In addition, an option of "Get in Touch" is always available at the top of the website which provides students with more personal support if they are not able to find answers to their situation or to find extra support. The link takes students to a contact form, in which responses will be provided to the student within one business day.

The NavigateMe tool was developed and continually enhanced through a collaborative and iterative process with academic staff, professional staff and students. Feedback on the tool includes:

- User reactions gauged through focus groups with open questions and a survey form sent after they have used the tool.

- Use of the online component is tracked using Google Analytics and web analytics on hits, statement chosen, number of action plans generated, and number of actions completed.

- De-identified analyses are also conducted to discovering trends and student progress after the use of the tool.

Enhancements

Based on the feedback from staff and students, web-based data and past research, enhancements have been suggested and will be implemented in 2017 which aims to further enrich student experiences on support services and empower students to seek ways to achieve their greatest potential during their studies. The tool is listed as a priority in the Deputy Vice Chancellor's (Academic) Strategic plan 2014 to 2018, and has received several internal and external significant funding for continual development and enhancement of student experience.

Personalised dashboard

The NavigateMe web analytics shows that topics students have chosen are correlated to key university dates and academic year of studies. This suggests that students tend to only seek relevant information when they see a need at the particular times. However there is a lack of evidence on whether the information has been translated into action. In addition, the data shows that students seek different information as they progress through their university life, indicating a need to connect students in different stages of their academic career to relevant resources. Yet the data shows that students do not seek support unless reminded in certain ways, for example in email correspondences. There is a need to assist students translate information into actions and develop a habit to reflect and act when needed.

Past studies (Morisano et al., 2010; Potter & Bye, 2014; Corrin & Barba, 2015) have found that visualising gaps in performance, and providing support resources and guidance alongside immediate feedback helps students reflect on their personal goals, and be more able to translate feedback into a course of action for long term behavioural changes. This also empowers student to develop better self-management skill which is an essential graduate attribute (Robbins, Oh, Le, & Button, 2009). Quality support services also plays a key role in educational success (Tinto, 2005), it has to be flexible, responsive and interactive (McGorry, 2003).

As such, a new personalised user dashboard is currently in development. It will visualise topics sought, previous topics chosen, progress of actions taken and other aspects. This will assist students to better reflect on their past and current situations, and discover what type of information they are seeking at a particular time. The visualisations will respond to student responses immediately. When students click "completed" for certain actions, it will reflect on a progress bar instantly. These will assist students to track their actions and empowers them to identify actions that need to be taken. There will also be reminder settings, which will send alerts students to remind them take actions, or return to the tool to look for updated and relevant information at different stages of their university life.

Expanding the use of the tool to engage with students

With engagement being the key to student success (Kahu, 2013), it is also critical to engage with students before students were already too far along the process of disengagement. NavigateMe was originally designed for students who failed more than half of their enrolled courses. It became apparent that many of these students are already disengaged. It was necessary to make it available to all students as a preventative rather than remedial measure

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for students who experience difficulties. NavigateMe is currently open to all students, and will be opened to potential students in 2017. Guest logons were created for the UNSW Aspire team to use with primary and high school students to assist them gain aspirations and insights into the life at university. This will act as an early engagement, which assists students transition into university, helps them understand and explore the support and development opportunities available.

Evaluation of Enhancements

With more personalisation information and better visualisations, students will be better empowered to take actions in seeking support, develop a habit to reflect and act, and thus able to reach their greatest potential. The impact of the enhancements will be analysed through surveys, focus groups, and web analytics. Feedback on users' experiences in using the tool will be gathered, and the number of action items completed, rate in returning to the tool at different stages of their university life, topics sought at various times, and retention rates will be analysed. Continual feedback will also be sought to ensure that the functionality and usability of the enhancements.

Discussion and future implications

Quality support services can assist student reach their full potential and achieve better educational achievements. In order to enhance student support services, it will be valuable to consider the following:

- Connecting students to relevant information at relevant times is vital. What are your strategies embedding your support services into the everyday life of students? How do you engage with students at key times to provide them with relevant information?
- What are your strategies in empowering students seek support and take actions to better prepare them in overcoming difficulties or expand their full potential in the future?
- How do you evaluate your services and what type of data does your service use to inform better practice?

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