

A cohesive Student Support model provides integrated support to at risk students at a regional Australian university

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Abstract

Australian Universities have developed programs to improve the retention and success of students with traditionally low participation rates. This study describes the role of the student support officer (SSO). This non-teaching position links the academic and non-academic support roles in targeted first year subjects. SSOs monitored students' attendance and performance and used a learning management system to identify students at risk of attrition or failure. 51% of targeted students had contact with an SSO, with contact initiated by the SSO 86% of the time. Not attending classes was the most common trigger for SSO initiated contact. Student feedback on the SSO role was very positive, with most students finding the services important and helpful and stating that they would recommend the services to a friend. We show that the SSO role provides an easily accessible, integrated and holistic referral service which delivers support to at risk students.

Introduction

Universities have a social responsibility to provide access to all capable students, regardless of background (Skene & Evamy, 2009). However, a key principle of the policy statement by the International Association of Universities notes that providing “access without a reasonable chance of success is an empty promise” (IAU, 2008, p. 1). The Bradley Review revealed low participation rates of students from low socio-economic status (SES) background, Indigenous students and students from rural and remote parts of Australia (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008), with a 2014 national survey revealing that students from these demographic groups experience difficulties coping with University studies (Baik, Naylor, & Arkoudis, 2015). In response, and taking into account increasing student diversification, Australian universities focus much attention and resources on developing, and implementing support structures and processes to optimise transition, retention and success for all higher education participants.

A range of effective first year transition, success and retention practices aim to enhance academic preparedness (Robbins et al., 2004), clarify student expectations (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005) and improve overall student engagement (Krause & Coates, 2008). These practices include: foundational academic preparation courses (Thalluri, 2016); orientation programs (Gill et al., 2011); pre-commencement student interviews (Wood, Gray-Ganter, & Bailey, 2016); the Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) program (Hryciw,

Tangalakis, Supple, & Best, 2013); and first year experience (FYE) communities of practice (McKenzie & Egea, 2016). While academic support services have been the topic of considerable research to date, services concerned with non-academic support currently remain under-researched (Dominguez-Whitehead, 2017). In addition to these targeted student support initiatives, Australian universities have developed a variety of in-house, institutional FYE support programs based on Kift and Nelson's (2005) transition pedagogy. For example, The University of Sydney Track and Connect program successfully lowered attrition and increased success rates through delivery of centralised, peer-led support with contacts initiated by a combination of at risk triggers based on demographics, LMS access, assessment performance and assumed prior knowledge (Barnes, Macalpine, & Munro, 2015). With the same focus on retention and success, James Cook University (JCU) introduced the student support officer (SSO) role to drive an integrated support service that combines specialized academic and non-academic advice and referral pathways for first year students.

The JCU SSO initiative was developed in consideration of the six curriculum-based principles for first year engagement (Kift & Nelson, 2005), such that it:

- 1) Provides specific, 'just-in-time' contact and support (transition);
- 2) Provides support for all students irrespective of background (diversity);
- 3) Purposefully scaffolds curriculum-driven contacts across the year (design);
- 4) Is fully integrated into subjects with the SSO treated as a teaching team member to normalize the SSO interactions and therefore enhance student engagement (engage);
- 5) Includes a focus on preparation, completion and feedback on assessment activities (assessment); and
- 6) Is regularly evaluated by students and staff via ethics-approved qualitative and quantitative research methodologies (evaluation and monitoring).

While in many ways similar to the University of Sydney initiative, instead of using senior peers the JCU SSO is a fulltime staff appointment within the academic division that provides a single point of contact for first year students on matters both academic (participation, learning and assessment) and non-academic (enrolment, systems access, referral for finance, housing and wellbeing advice). Having a single point of contact was a deliberate strategy to ensure that students across all disciplines received consistent support. This was considered important so that when student peers discuss their SSO contact, similar experiences are shared, and therefore normalised. This paper describes the role and the student and staff experience of the SSO within the Division of Tropical Health and Medicine (DTHM) of a regional university. This paper provides a unique scholarly perspective on the first year transition pedagogy as it critically evaluates the implementation of a discipline-specific contextualization of an institutional retention and success initiative through the lenses of both students and staff from a multi-campus regional University.

The role of Student Support Officers at JCU

James Cook University has five Australian campuses with a domestic student profile that includes 23% low SES, 22% regional/remote and 61% who are the first in their family to attend a university (JCU Student Management System). The university offers a range of transition support strategies including the PASS program, orientation activities, student mentors, FYE coordinators and academic advisers within disciplines, and centralised student equity and wellbeing and careers services. Although these services have been successful, there remained a gap between the non-academic and academic student support that was directly linked to the curriculum.

In 2015 JCU used Federal Government HEPPP (The Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program) funding as part of the three-year plan (JCU Access, Participation and Success Plan, 2015-2017) to create SSO positions within the Academic Divisions. These non-teaching SSO positions aimed to link academic and non-academic student support, and optimise the university transition for targeted undergraduate students. In the DTHM the SSO role was specifically designed to monitor and support first year students enrolled in specified subjects within target undergraduate courses, with the role fulfilled by two fulltime SSO positions. The target courses were: Bachelor degrees of Biomedical Science, Medical Laboratory Science, Occupational Therapy, Nursing Science, Pharmacy, Physiotherapy, Psychological Science, Speech Pathology, Sport and Exercise Science, and Veterinary Science. These undergraduate courses were targeted due to the relatively large representation of at least one of the key equity student groups as identified by Martin Indicators (Martin, 1994), which are endorsed by HEPPP: 1) people from low SES backgrounds; 2) people with disability; 3) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; 4) people from rural and remote areas; 5) people from a non-English background; and 6) women in non-traditional areas of study.

Eleven first year subjects across the ten courses were selected on the basis of historically high fail rates and large enrolment numbers (that is, core subjects). Awareness of the SSO personnel and roles was promoted to students through various avenues: 1) contact details on the JCU website, in the subject outlines and on the subject learning management site; 2) SSO roles promoted during orientation week sessions; and 3) SSOs introductions at the first lecture/tutorial of each subject themselves. SSO contact with students was instigated in one of two ways: 1) the SSO responding to a student inquiry; and 2) the SSO contacted the student as a result of a specific monitoring trigger.

SSO activities consisted of monitoring student attendance and performance in targeted subjects and identifying students that were potentially at risk of failure. The following triggers (flags) were used for monitoring student participation and performance:

1. Non-attendance at Orientation week;
2. Not accessing the subject learning management system by the end of teaching week 2;
3. Not attending specified classes such as practicals, tutorials or laboratory sessions;
4. Non-submission of first (early) assessment task;
5. Failure or marginal pass of first assessment task;
6. Failure or marginal pass of two or more subjects in the previous semester;
7. Academic standing of 'at-risk' or 'conditional';
8. Low grades and/or low engagement.

One key component of successful transition activities is that the support be driven by and embedded in the curriculum (Kift & Nelson, 2005). In order to achieve this aim, consultation meetings were held with subject coordinators prior to semester to identify the critical tasks (assessment and participation tasks) that students were required to complete. Some of the HEPPP recommended flags were modified following discussions with subject coordinators to ensure that students received 'just in time' contact from the SSO, thus focusing support on preparation and completion of assessment tasks. Throughout the semester the SSOs monitored student performance against agreed criteria and individually contacted students that were flagged. Following the first semester of SSO engagement (semester two, 2015) flags one and seven were removed. Students are not required to sign attendance records for O-week activities, thus making it problematic to identify specific students that did not attend; and follow-up for flag seven was determined to be the responsibility of the FYE Coordinators and Academic Advisers.

The activities of Student Support Officers

This paper reports on the DTHM SSO activities during the first semester (February to June) of 2016, which was the second semester of SSO engagement. Of the 1,691 unique students enrolled in targeted subjects, 860 (51%) were in contact with an SSO during the semester. The total SSO interactions varied by discipline, largely related to cohort size, and ranged between 9 (1% of total SSO interactions) for Speech Pathology to 695 (42%) for the Nursing Discipline. The relative proportion of SSO contact within each discipline varied between 23 and 79% (Figure 1).

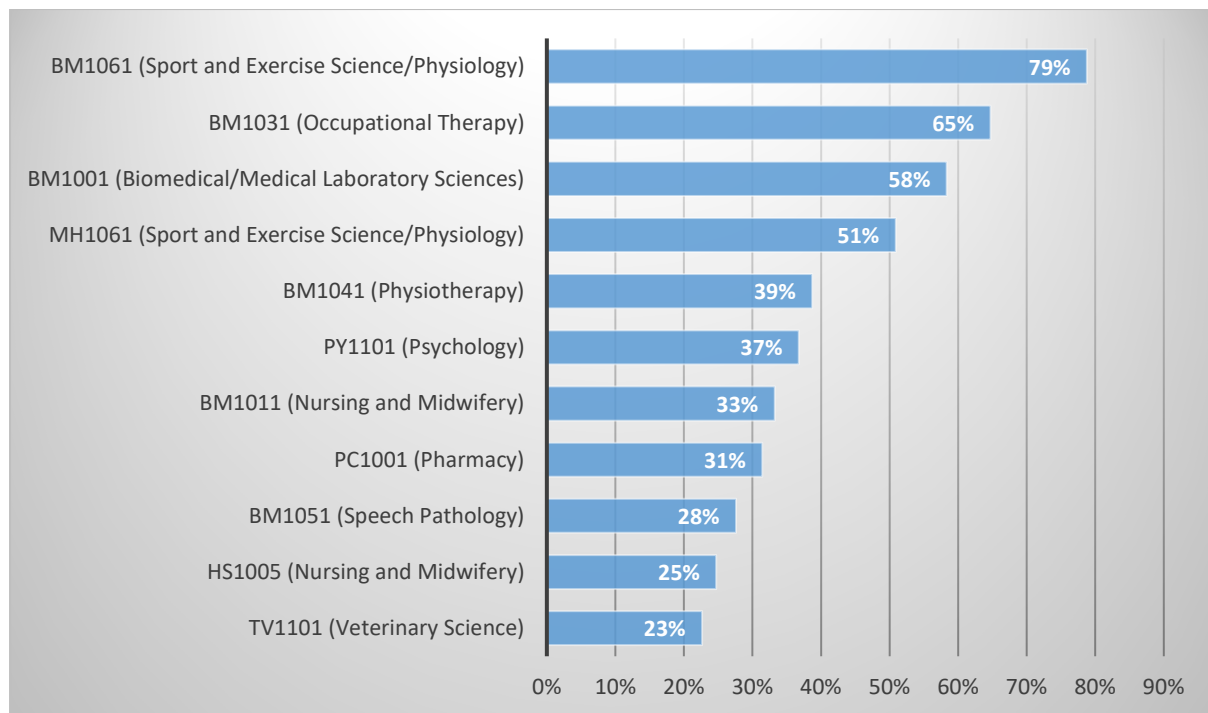


Figure 1. SSO Contact Rate by Subject

Note: Contact rate was calculated by dividing number of students contacted by SSO during the semester by the total number of students enrolled in a subject

In total, there were 1,672 interactions between SSOs and students. Students were in contact with an SSO an average 1.9 times, ranging between 1 to 12 contacts per student. Two hundred and forty (13% of total interactions) contacts were student-instigated inquiries, while 1432 (87%) were SSO-instigated as a result of the flag system, with non-attendance at class being the most common flag (Figure 2). SSO interactions were approximately evenly split across phone (37%), email (32%), and combined email and phone (30%) communications. Face to face meetings represented a very small, yet time-consuming proportion of contact (<2%, 27 meetings) with meetings lasting between 30-60 minutes.

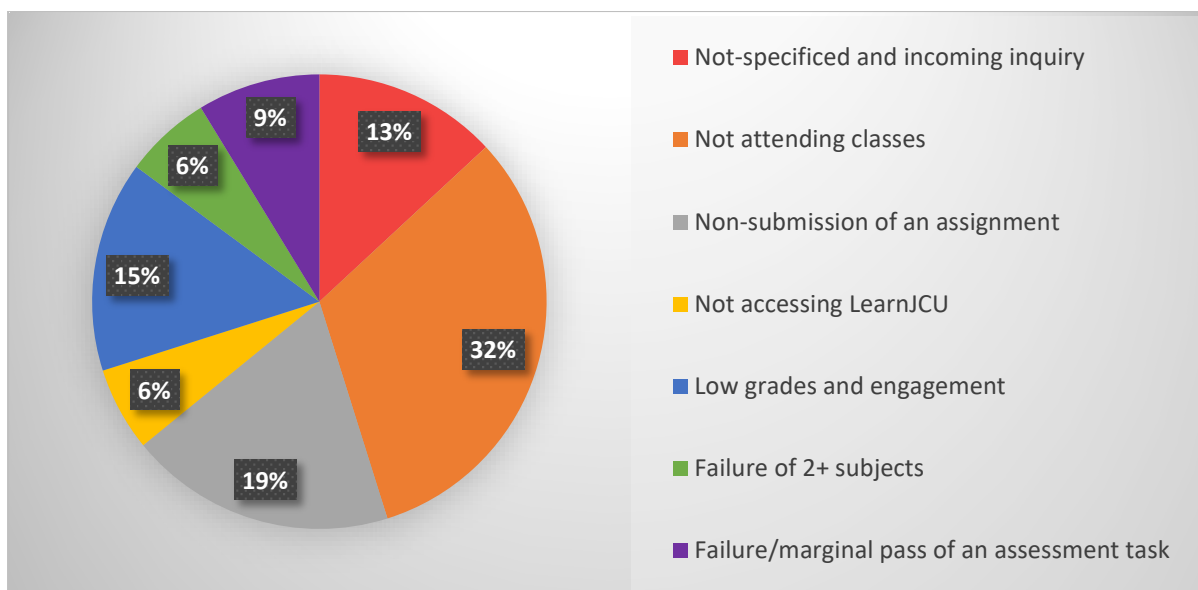


Figure 2. SSO interactions by HEPPP flag

Feedback about the Student Support Activities

Following the introduction of SSO role in 2015, feedback was collected from sources that were immediately impacted by the introduction: 1. subject coordinators of the targeted subjects; 2. first year student cohort that was monitored by SSOs; and 3. students that were in direct contact with an SSO. Ethics approval for the research was granted by the James Cook University Human Ethics Committee (H6585).

Feedback from teaching staff

At the end of the semester, 8 of the 11 subject coordinators completed a satisfaction feedback form. All (100%) responding subject coordinators stated that they were very satisfied with the SSO services (as measured on 5 point Likert scale ranging from ‘Very Unsatisfied’ to ‘Very Satisfied’). All subject coordinators mentioned the need to improve records of student attendance at classes and in-class test completions. The following quotes provide examples of staff feedback:

“[SSO] was excellent in coordinating with me during the planning stage at the start of semester; confirming follow-up strategies; confirming appropriate advice regarding subject/assessment information; providing timely follow-up feedback; adjusting to the demands/changes during semester.”

“Having [SSO] available to help with student queries regarding enrolment and problems with the e-text was excellent and helped save a lot of time. Her collation of medical certificates and attendance was also helpful. Most importantly her role in supporting students with personal issues is vital - she took the time to identify and then follow through with these students.”

Subject coordinators appreciated the SSO services as this freed their time to focus on curriculum while ensuring students received ‘just in-time’ follow up to not ‘fall off the radar’.

Feedback from the first year cohort

JCU conducts end of semester institutional evaluations in the form of ‘YourJCU Subject and Teaching Survey’. Subject coordinators for six of the 11 targeted subjects included the following additional questions in the survey:

1. I know that Student Support Officer [name of the relevant SSO] is available for me to contact if I need any help with succeeding at University. The answer was a 5 point Likert scale ranging from ‘Strongly Disagree’ to ‘Strongly Agree’.
2. Please tell us what support services you would like to have available to help you succeed at University. This was an open ended question with students asked to provide suggestions in the free text space.

Overall 1,117 students remained enrolled in these six subjects at the time of survey deployment, of which 317 provided an answer to the first question (28% response rate) and 71 provided an open-text response to the second question (6% response rate). The results indicate that 66% of responding students were aware of the SSO services, as indicated by ‘strongly agree’ or ‘agree’ answers. In open ended responses, students stated that they wanted more tutors and tutorials available. Students also expressed their desire for extended hours for accessing learning supports and facilities such as practical laboratories, computer rooms, study areas and the library.

Feedback from contacted students

In order to evaluate student satisfaction with SSO services, an online survey of SSO-contacted students was conducted after completion of the semester and remained open for approximately one month. Students were invited to participate via an email sent from the SSO that contained a link to the survey. The survey was facilitated through the ‘Blue Evaluate’ platform, which is the same platform used for the institutional YourJCU evaluations. Of 816 invited students, 68 completed the survey (8.3% response rate). While the response rate is low, if the purpose of an evaluation survey is to promote improvement in provided services, then even one response is useful (Nulty, 2008). Thus, despite the low response rate, the data provides valuable information about students’ satisfaction with SSO services, however, extrapolation should be done with caution.

Students rated their agreement with certain statements about their SSO contact on a five point Likert scale ranging from ‘Strongly Agree’ to ‘Strongly Disagree’ (Figure 3). Statements 1-9 summarise respondents’ evaluation of the SSO contact. Most respondents (more than 80%) expressed their agreement with offered statements thus providing evidence that respondents valued the SSO services and their SSO contact was mostly positive. Statements 10-13 refer to the outcome of the SSO contact. Of these, respondents’ evaluated statement 12 ‘I gained better knowledge about JCU services’ most positively (approximately 70% agreement). More than half of the respondents agreed with ‘I gained clearer understanding of pass requirements’ and ‘I gained assistance to stay on top of my studies’, while 40% agreed with the statement ‘SSO helped my transition to University’.

Respondents were asked to state the circumstances in which they would contact the SSO via ‘yes/no’ selection for six potential circumstances (Figure 4). The most common circumstance in which students would contact an SSO was when they are not sure who to contact with their inquiry.

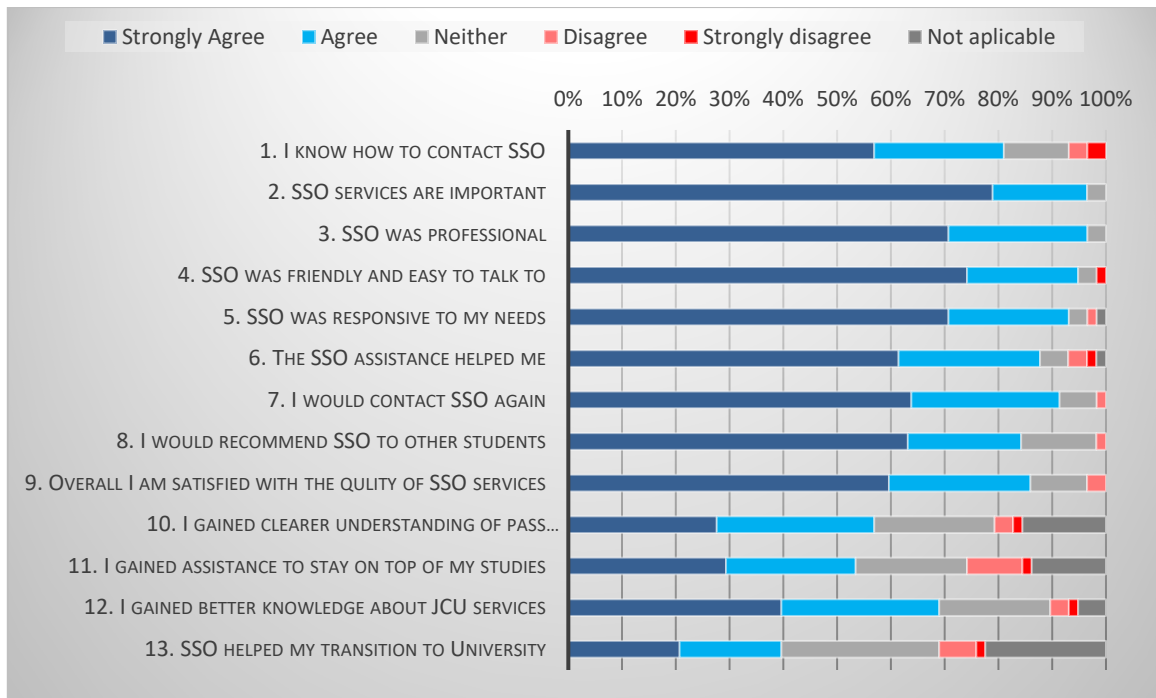


Figure 3. Student responses about SSO services

Students also provided open-ended additional feedback about their interaction with the SSO. Twenty-eight responses were received, of which 25 were positive and three were negative/dissatisfied comments. Examples of responses are provided below.

“[SSO] was really welcoming and helpful when I had IT issues, she asked me to come see her to resolve my issue and this was extremely helpful and reassuring.”

“[SSO] gave me perspective & reminded me of my goal & passion for my study at a difficult time, which helped greatly.”

“Overall I was satisfied with each interaction that occurred. After seeking help at the student support office I always felt more confident with assessments and tests.”

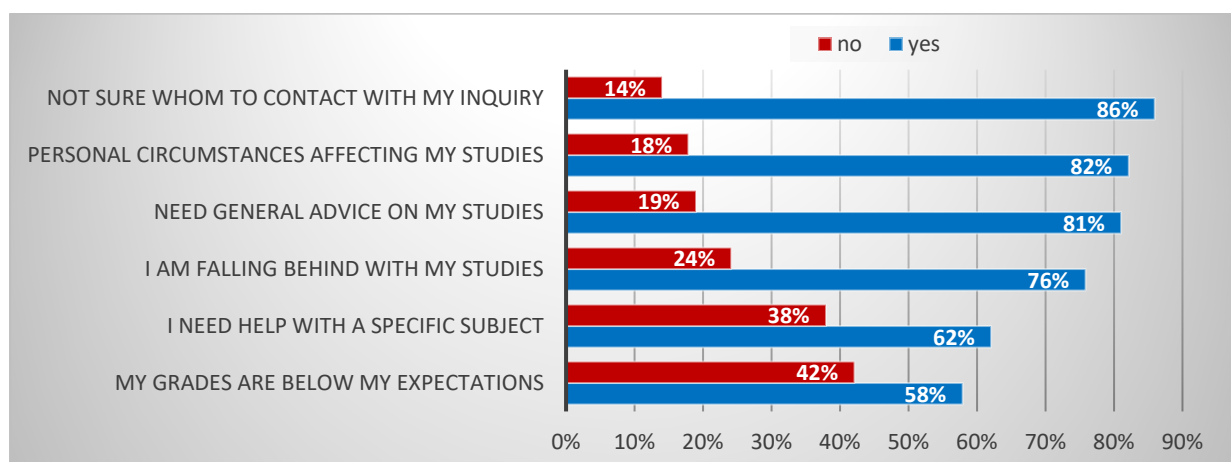


Figure 4. Student responses about circumstances in which they would contact SSO

Discussion and Conclusions

Improving retention rates and promoting student success have become increasingly important for Universities in the current climate of expanding student demographic, social and educational heterogeneity. SSOs introduced to JCU in 2015 have provided an integrated and coordinated risk identification, advisory and referral service modelled on the six curriculum-based principles for first year engagement developed by Kift & Nelson (2005). In addition to providing support to all students that was specific and ‘just in time’, embedded into the curriculum and focused on assessment, SSOs also triaged students to a range of institutional non-academic and academic support services. Embedding SSOs into targeted first year subjects allowed seamless linking of the students both with their specific subjects and with centralised support services. Half of the targeted students had direct contact with an SSO and student feedback from the cohort of targeted students indicated that 66% were aware of the services provided by the SSO.

Interestingly, 86% of contact between the SSO and the students was SSO initiated based on pre-determined strategic flags, with non-attendance at classes being the most common trigger for contact. The high percentage of SSO initiated contact may indicate that these students received ‘just in time’ support and advice that they may not have otherwise received. Students who use support services more frequently report higher social adjustment to University and as a result are more likely to complete their degree (Grant-Vallone, Reid, Umali, & Pohlert, 2003). Despite the view that academic staff should build bridges between the academic curriculum and institutional student support systems (Grosset, 1991), a lack of approachability, failure to listen and lack of availability of staff are all demonstrated factors in student underachievement and withdrawal from studies (Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). The SSO can help scaffold the first year student’s transition into proactive help seeking behaviors and help to normalise the use support services. The SSO also performed a critical role in the early identification of at risk students, enabling implementation of ‘just in time’ support before students reach crisis. Early identification and implementation of support has been shown to reduce failure rates in specific courses (Thalluri, 2016). When at risk first year students at Queensland University of Technology were contacted by student success advisors they achieved significantly higher academic success, and showed stronger retention compared to the at risk students who were not contacted (Nelson, Duncan, & Clarke, 2009).

A range of variables can be used as predictors of poor academic performance and/or a student being at risk of attrition. In this study, a learning management system (LMS) was used to monitor some of the pre-defined flags. LMS can provide a range of analytics which may be predictors of student success (Campbell De Blois & Oblinger, 2007) however knowledge of specific subject and assessment design is essential in determining which variables may be meaningful predictors (Macfadyen & Dawson, 2010). In our study, the SSO provided an essential integration point between LMS learning analytics and the subject academic, allowing at risk predictors to be gathered and actioned in a timely manner. Grounded in transition pedagogy the SSOs enabled the provision of strategically timed support driven by curriculum and assessment design, as per Kift & Nelson’s (2005) principles for first year engagement, and in addition, provided a consistent point of contact across multiple subjects.

Feedback from students that used the SSO services was very positive. Most students that responded to the survey thought that the services were important, that the assistance helped and that they would recommend the SSO services to a friend. Students reported that they sought SSO services most frequently for personal circumstances affecting their studies, for general advice on their studies and for when they were unsure of whom to contact with an inquiry. The

most positive outcome reported by students was a better knowledge of institutional support services. This formed a good foundation for students' future help seeking behavior and supports the view that the SSO role was effective at triaging students, providing referrals without replicating services. Academic staff were all very positive about the SSO role. Staff responded that they were better able to focus on teaching content, and that the SSO was better suited to providing identification and follow-up of at risk students. The SSO role provides an easily accessible, integrated and holistic referral service that has been previously advocated (Morey & Robbins, 2011). As outlined above, one limitation of this study is the low response rate of students who used the SSO services on our questionnaire. Future studies should aim to increase this response rate, perhaps by timing questionnaires to coincide with the resolution of the issue.

This study describes the role of the SSO and demonstrates a very positive response from both students and staff. The SSO performs an important bridging role between the student, the academic and the centralised institutional support services. Future studies should aim to investigate the correlation between student demographics and SSO usage, and the impact of SSO interactions and student retention and academic success.

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