Engaging with the student at risk of disengaging: the VU Student Link program

Jacinta Richards[1]
Miguel Gil[2]
Yolanda Evagelistis[3]
Danielle Borlovan[4]

[1] Manager, Student Transition and Retention (including Early Uni Pathways) Centre for Student Success, Victoria University, Melbourne; [2] Transition Coordinator, Victoria University, Melbourne; [3] Transition Coordinator, Victoria University, Melbourne; Danielle Borlovan,

Abstract

This presentation revisits and discusses the implementation of the Student Link four years down the track after its initial launching in 2013. The project comments on a number of significant changes introduced in 2016 which have resulted in a more robust and internally coherent program. While seeking to tap on the wealth of knowledges embodied in the University, the new Student Link program aims to provide a more rounded and immediate response to the varying needs of undergraduate university students, both commencing or new to the university as they quickly move through their student life cycle. The program is then situated in the context of similar Monitoring of Student Learning Engagement programs currently been implemented among Australian universities.

Introduction

Victoria University has one of the most diverse student bodies in Australia, with a strong representation of students from equity groups well above Bradley benchmarks. Strengths in this area have been rightly celebrated by higher education world expert Jamil Salmi, the World Bank's coordinator of tertiary education professionals (Kelly 2013) who placed Victoria University as a top world class university in terms of the amount of difference it is able to make to students' lives when considering progress made from beginning to graduation. Retention and Transition expert Joe Cuseo had already stated as much in a landmark visit to Melbourne one year before when in the context of Victoria University's efforts, he stated: "We shouldn't define quality based on who we let in but on the students we turn out relative to the way they were when they came in" (Trounson, 2011). It is, therefore, an unlikely coincidence that Victoria University has been ranked 56 of universities worldwide under 50 years in the *Times Higher Education* Young University Rankings 2017 (2017).

From 2010 on Victoria University has been undergoing a change of culture, partly as a result of post-Bradley pressures in the new contestable world of higher education, and partly in response to the need to become a leaner and more agile university. In 2010 retention and transition were solidly put on the agenda of all university departments not only out of pragmatic concerns but also as a focus for major institutional change, including a much needed integration of information systems, a revamping of customer-focused student services centering around hotspots in the student lifecycle, and further refinements in the delivery and re-conceptualisation of support and the first year experience.

In the process a shift occurred from retention and transition, often misperceived and even resented as isolated panaceas, to the fostering of a culture of student success. The ability to make a difference in this challenging context, however, has been continually put to the test by rapid changes in the make-up of the student body coupled with Government's ever declining funding levels. If anything, retention and transition have gained even greater prominence as a result. In this Victoria University is no exception.

Indeed, for the past 15 years in Australia retention and transition efforts have consistently moved along a continuum of initiatives articulated around the concept of the first year experience in higher education. First year experience surveys, first year experience principles and transition pedagogy (Kift et al 2010; Kift, 2015) have provided both the impetus and a rationale for a variety of retention practices. This includes, significantly, the implementation of systems for the monitoring of student learning engagement (MSLE), which, in an Australian context, was first documented and conceptualised by Nelson and Creagh (2013) as part on an equity and social justice mandate, and more recently by Colvin and colleagues (2015)

It is in this wider context that Victoria University adopted the Student Link (SL) program in 2013 in partnership with Hobsons International. By the end 2015 Victoria University was in a position to combine its own internal predictive analytics system with a diverse pool of knowledges embedded in various sections of the university. Located in the Student Retention and Transition area as part of the Centre for Student Success, the new SL program was piloted in 2016, harnessing the knowledge generated by its own predictive analytics and the interactions of a large team of 35 trained Student Transition Mentors (STMs), charged with the contacting of students at risk. First Year Champions and Retention and Transition Coordinators provided a further connection with the Colleges and academic staff. Main features of the program are represented in Figure 1.

In terms of the framework provided by Colvin and colleagues (2015), clearly the Student Link program has been "viewed as a site for potential disruption and innovation to improve the quality of the student learning experience"

- reinvigorating the first year experience
- nurturing an understanding of transition pedagogies across Colleges
- developing a data-driven and informed picture of the university studentship and the student life-cycle
- building up a strong customer-focused culture in all student service areas
- enhancing the IT knowledge base, the interoperability of internal systems and its user friendliness for both students and staff
- bringing together more and more aspects of all the above

The Student Link 2016 pilot program: main features and findings

At variance with other MSLE programs and in keeping with Victoria University's culture of engaging with students at the coal face, Student Link uses a distinctive blend of strategies to link with the student in a strongly personalised fashion through the active work of a team of Student Transition Mentor and a revolving door open to student-initiated contacts

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Table 1. Main features of Victoria University´s Student Link program - 2016

Central Approach informed by colleges	• Driven by predictive analytics • Extended by College input • Utilises an Engagement Framework
Shaping for Colleges	• Meeting the needs of Individual Colleges • Reflecting college approaches to retention • Building predictive capacity of analytics
Supporting and Developing Approaches	• Transition and Retention Co-ordinators working with colleges • Links to interventions strengthened (Academic Support and Development, Student Services) • Harnessing the capacities of Customer Relationship Management tool, student contact centres • Reported and evaluated for continuous improvement

The predictive analytics component uses information gathered from previous years to assign new enrolling students a probability index of attrition based on a number of predictors, of which two in particular have stood out the test of time: a) use of the internal timetabling tool, and b) use of the student learning management system. On the basis of this, Student Transition Mentors start contacting students placed within a given attrition range. The contacting of students deemed to be already completely disengaged is syphoned out to the Communications team. A chief aim of the program is to achieve focused and timely conversations as the best way to maximize resources and their likely benefits for both the students and the University.

While predictive analytics supplied the bulk of the Student Link initial contact list, another category was made up of students who had rated "low" their expectations of the University and their degree of academic preparedness through a readiness and expectations survey administered during the orientation period and the first week of the semester. As it turned out, respondents to the self-assessment tool exhibited similar post-census retention patterns regardless of how well they rated their expectations and skills. Importantly, respondents evinced significant lower levels of post-census attrition compared to the generality of their peers. This behaviour suggests that students who engage at the early stages with such instruments are already well on their path to succeed as students. This pre-disposition may also be reinforced by the constructive feedback itself that students receive in return. Students who took the readiness survey were a reflection of the VU student body as a whole, with equity categories well represented except for students of non-English backgrounds, who were clearly under-represented (15% compared to VU's overall 28%).

Another cohort of students contacted by the student transition mentors was made up of students who have established contact with STMs as a result of various strategic initiatives arranged during the lead up from enrolment to Orientation and beyond. While not necessarily at risk, the existence of this category provides STMs with the opportunity to interact with students fully representative of the University spectrum, itself a source of valuable insights that mentors use to enrich their own developmental journey.

Colleges have a vital role in keeping the project earth-bound, connected with their changing realities, and adapted to the needs of their student populations. Colleges do so in various ways. First, they select a number of first year core units identifying an early significant piece of

assessment. Students who fail these assignments are also added to the list of students to be contacted by STMs.

Second, Colleges can start processing information about results attained to inform their own decision-making or simply test the validity of assumptions or conclusions for which evidence has been lacking or shaky in the past. For instance, mature age and late enrolling students were included as special cohorts for STMs´ follow-up in two particular Colleges. Likewise, at the end of semester 1 and semester 2 manual lists of at risk students were contrasted with lists generated through the iterative predictive and learning analytic process. While insights generated in this way require a broader pool of students effectively contacted, some aspects are already in evidence, pointing solidly to the effectiveness of the program in some key regards:

1) The predictive analytics component is indeed robust enough to effectively identify students with a strong to moderate likelihood of early disengagement. This is valuable in itself as it allows communication teams to enter into "exiting" conversations with students who have unofficially attrited or are very likely to do so. The possibility of intermissions or other options can then be discussed as appropriate.
2) Students less likely to attrite but nevertheless in a disengagement mode, can be contacted by STMs as part of a peer-to-peer conversation that is friendly and stays relevant to the student´s academic and career interests.
3) STMs' contacts make a difference in terms of post-census retention and general feel of wellbeing and belonging of contacted students.
4) Mature age students and late enrolling students can be approached in a more effective manner to ensure that they are aware of opportunities for support, with referrals channelled to appropriate areas, including academic advisers, support and development advisors, counselling services, and so on. An important finding in this regard is that mature age students are more likely to withdraw prior to census date, and less likely to do so afterwards. This suggests that mature age students adopt a more strategic and rationalised approach to their studies than younger fellow students.
5) Previous grey or blind areas are now open to greater scrutiny and actionable discussion as a result of insights generated in the process. This is the case, for instance, of:
   a. non-submitting students, ie. students who while not withdrawing formally decide not to engage at all despite being enrolled in one or more units
   b. unsatisfactory progress students can now pro-actively be approached in a more targeted way both by academics and university service areas
6) A more nuanced and integrative picture of the student can be formed as a result of the recording and flagging of interactions with students in the Customer Relationship system, all while addressing privacy and confidentiality concerns.

Future plans and conclusion

In this new phase Student Link has moved decidedly from a pilot stage to a maturity phase. Ownership of the process is now widely distributed amongst a large number of University areas, all of which ensures that the program stays relevant and makes use of the stakeholders and partners' respective strengths and knowledges. Regular internal communication, planning and implementation meetings between involved parties ensure that action points are followed up and that the vision of what is possible is firmly held together.

As mentioned, the Student Link program we have described meets most of the criteria of "cluster 2" institutional approaches to student retention and learning analytics (Colvin et al, 2015), and thus can be expected to become more sustainable in the medium and long-term future.

From the start, Victoria University has been conscious of the need to combine and integrate resources, seeing knowledge of the student as widely distributed between numerous university areas and, not the least, the student themselves. Further insights can be expected to be generated as the ability to test assumptions increases while the program undergoes further streamlining. While integration and consensus around generated insights remain work in progress, there is no question that benefits are becoming less tentative and more promising in more ways than previously anticipated.

Suggested key questions

1) How does Student Link compare with other MSLE (Monitoring of Student Learning Engagement) programs currently deployed by other Australian Universities?
2) How does the new Student Link value-add to previous iterations of the program?
3) How does Student Link fits into the student life-cycle?

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