

Every student counts: individualised pathway support by an academic Access Coordinator through the STEPS enabling course

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Abstract

An enabling course gives students a comprehensive transition to higher education, increasing their knowledge, skills, confidence and resilience. A vital part of the Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies (STEPS) course at CQUniversity is the role of the Access Coordinator (AC) at each study location and mode. Analysis of feedback from students revealed very positive responses. It showed that the ACs are approachable and friendly, and help with student preparedness and expectations, from before enrolment, and right through the STEPS journey. The consistent and timely support demystified the processes and helped students feel engaged with the university, and to overcome challenges such as anxiety and interruptions to education.

Introduction

Transition to university is not just an event, it is a process. This time is vitally important for any student, but more so for students from non-traditional backgrounds. As a multi-campus, regional university with a large distance cohort, CQUniversity attracts a large number of students from regional and remote areas, and who are first in their family to attend university. In regional areas of Australia, there is a lower uptake of university study than in metropolitan areas (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2014; Johns et al., 2016; Stirling & Rossetto, 2015). The reasons for this have been outlined as the influence of the mining sector tempting young people to take up jobs rather than further study. There is also not the history of university study so many potential university students would be first in family if they attend (Johns et al., 2016). In the past there has also been a lack of ‘university presence’ in regional and surrounding rural areas and so students have not seen it as a realistic possibility (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2014). In turn, all of this has led to a lower uptake of university prerequisite subjects at school, and more of a focus on vocational education and job skills. Thus students are not leaving school with the appropriate qualifications or skills to enter an undergraduate degree.

The Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies (STEPS) course was originally conceived in 1985 through the Commonwealth Government’s Higher Education Equity Program (HEEP) which gave CQUniversity the opportunity to offer a fee-free tertiary preparatory program. The entry guidelines and criteria for STEPS admittance have changed significantly since its 1985 inception as has the program structure as a whole. The STEPS course is currently offered internally across ten locations as well as via distance studies, with

yearly student entry numbers ranging from 30-180 for on campus delivery locations to 600+ distance.

From the recommendations of an external review (King, 2011) of the enabling courses offered via CQUniversity in 2011, the STEPS course underwent a substantial overhaul. This overhaul included the introduction of a single enabling course at CQUniversity – STEPS – introduced in 2012, which now offered one core unit and a suite of eleven elective units that are tailored to the specific undergraduate entry requirements of the student (Doyle, 2006). Shifts in entry guidelines also broadened in terms of age of entry, testing requirements, unit offerings and time allocations for study completion. One of the desired outcomes of the external review was to increase overall student retention in the course which saw the formation of the Access Coordinator (AC) role. The AC role was created “to manage the course on each campus (and via distance delivery) and provide pastoral care to participating students, particularly those at risk of withdrawing from the course” (Seary, Willans, & Cook, 2016, p. 4). As an institution wide initiative for the STEPS course, AC were introduced for each of the ten campuses and one for students studying by Distance Education.

Students come with a wide variety of backgrounds and academic experience and as such STEPS is a pathway to CQUniversity undergraduate degrees. Constant consultation and liaison with all Heads of Course across the university ensures that STEPS prepares for the majority of bachelor level courses. STEPS is therefore customised to each student’s needs in academic skills. Core proficiencies such as study skills, information literacy, academic writing and referencing are compulsory. Depending on their intended future course, a student’s study plan might also incorporate computing skills, mathematics and introductory sciences. It also provides opportunities to build confidence, interpersonal skills, motivation and career planning. Hence it addresses the issues mentioned above where students are first in family or do not have a traditional pathway or role models for university study. STEPS also provides an opportunity for students who have had barriers to their education pathways including learning disabilities, poor school experience, financial issues, mental and physical health issues, or an unsupportive family environment. As such, people come into STEPS from a broad range of ages, education levels and life experiences.

For students the application and enrolment process involves two stages. Stage one involves an application form and online diagnostic testing. Stage two involves an interview and orientation, both done by ACs. ACs not only need to have institutional wide knowledge of official guidelines and documents to enroll the students into appropriate units within STEPS, but also need to use academic experience and knowledge to advise students on the most appropriate study plans for their individual needs and circumstances. This requires empathy and attention to detail to assess previous personal, work, and study situations to help students have the best chance at achievement and transition on to undergraduate courses.

In addition to the practical side of the AC role, the ACs are pivotal in providing pastoral care for STEPS students before and during their STEPS study. The Equity Challenge Unit in the United Kingdom (2013) provide a useful definition of Pastoral Care in HE.

Pastoral care comprises the range of support services that are provided for students' emotional, psychological and spiritual wellbeing. While most institutions will have specialist services dedicated to the provision of this support, academic staff also have a critical role to play, being best placed to observe behaviour in the learning environment that might indicate that a student is in need of support. The relationship between academic achievement and resilience in dealing with personal issues is well documented, and a student who receives relevant and timely support in dealing with the problems of everyday life is more likely to have the energy and motivation to do well in their studies.

Pastoral care has been used as a successful retention tool in the Secondary schooling system but in terms of Higher Education, this role has largely fallen as an added workload task to teaching academic staff (Pitman & Trinidad, 2016). Within the STEPS course, the AC role is responsible for the facilitation of academic and pastoral care needs of students from pre-admission to completion and can be seen as the 'one point of contact' for the student throughout the duration of their STEPS studies (and sometimes beyond) which can extend from one term of study to a maximum of six terms.

Many students have had barriers to learning including family, health (mental and physical), schooling, social, and financial issues. This means that these students do not have the knowledge or resources to be able to plan their study journey by themselves. During the individual interview process for STEPS entry the AC draws on a range of factors, such as diagnostic testing results, student's personal situation, family responsibilities and employment circumstances to establish a study plan that will best suit the ability and needs of the student. This time is also used to establish a 'connection' with the student and create an environment of open communication and support that will build with the student throughout their STEPS journey.

Literature review

There are increasing numbers of students attending higher education, including a higher number of students from traditionally under-represented backgrounds (Devlin & Shea, 2012; Kift, 2015; Stirling & Rossetto, 2015; Thalluri, 2016). This means that they are less likely to be prepared for the tertiary environment, not only in terms of their academic ability, but also in their expectations. "It is often students from the key equity groups... who fail to transition successfully when our institutional practices, approaches and cultures are uncoordinated, piecemeal and not inclusive" (Kift, 2015, p. 53). A study by Stirling and Rossetto (2015) revealed that students developed "an overwhelmed sense of anxiety... in part, due to the unexpected, unfamiliar, and sometimes completely confusing demands of university study" (Stirling & Rossetto, 2015, p. 10). In fact the most highly reported reasons for student attrition are "perceptions of course and teaching quality, lack of clarity around what is required for success, limited engagement, and expectations mismatch" (Kift, 2015, p. 53).

Due to the enabling nature of STEPS, the students are more highly likely to be from non-traditional backgrounds and from families and schools where attaining a tertiary education

has not been seen as a priority. It is not beneficial to treat these students as if there is something wrong with them in a “deficit model” (Devlin & Shea, 2012). Students do not have the knowledge to cope in such a complex and unfamiliar environment and in the case of being first-in-family to attend higher education, there is no family knowledge that can be passed on to these students to achieve success (Devlin & Shea, 2012; Kift, 2015).

It is vital that there is facilitation into and support throughout the transition to university. Kift (2015) argues that this should be in the form of “just-in-time, just-for-me tailored support, especially for time-poor students whose differing social and cultural capital on entry demands the equitable unpacking of the ‘hidden’ rules and expectations of and for learning success” (Kift, 2015, p. 54). In STEPS, the AC and associated administration staff take a lot of the burden off the students around these hidden rules. An AC is proficient at interpreting the needs of the students and explaining only the relevant aspects to the students. The AC discusses the study plan, and once the student agrees, no other processes are required for the student until they are ready to study.

The timing of support is important for practical information especially around the demands of study and student expectations. Wood, Gray-Ganter and Bailey (2016) used telephone interviews to communicate specific academic and practical requirements to Nursing students after they had been accepted but before they commenced study. They identified issues with students expectations of study: students underestimated the time required and impact of study on other areas of their lives; and students were unaware how study would affect their physical and mental health. It is interesting that the nature of this information is very similar to that provided at orientation, but it was the individual contact that helped with a “sense of connection... describing the experience as ...really good; ...breaks isolation; ...someone to listen to concerns” (Wood et al., 2016, p. 28). This was particularly true for the external students they interviewed who were “mature-aged, located in regional locations and often working and committed to childcare responsibilities” (Wood et al., 2016, p. 29). ACs for STEPS have a thorough knowledge of the requirements of the course and the units and can justify recommendations to the students, for example to study part time. Students take heed of this as the AC is seen to be taking interest in the individual student and offering personal advice, rather than generic advice that is often played down or ignored (Wood et al., 2016).

“In Collier and Morgan’s study, first-generation students were uniquely concerned about student-teacher contacts... in terms of how approachable they perceived their teachers to be” (Devlin & Shea, 2012, p. 390). This means that if students in STEPS do find themselves suffering from concerns around their perceived abilities, or even personal issues such as health or study/work/balance, then it can be daunting to approach their teachers about such matters, especially when the student may have up to eight different lecturers across their time in STEPS. An AC offers a central location and one person who can work with the student across their units and liaise with all of their lecturers. An AC can provide consistent guidance for the student and build rapport, trust and hence student engagement.

Students starting STEPS are highly anxious (Willans & Seary, 2011). Thus their very first interactions are critical. For students from non-traditional backgrounds, support “should

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foster a critical sense of belonging and student identity, through involvement and connectedness with the student's university" (Kift, 2015, p. 54). This is one of the most vital roles of the AC. It has been shown that it is not necessarily an artefact of prior barriers that leads to inevitable disengagement or failure, as there are many students who succeed despite adversity (Whannell & Whannell, 2015). Students who are aware of the need for support and can be engaged in ways that make them feel valuable, then this can give the right conditions for success. While STEPS features units of study that heavily feature this self-reflection for success, it is the AC who first instils confidence around realistic study options and planning around their personal situations.

It is the individualisation of the support from the AC that is vital to the psychological and emotional identity of the STEPS participant as an actual university student. "The process of positive identity formation is proposed as following a cyclical path where ongoing successful academic engagement, particularly with... academic staff, progressively strengthens the university student identity" (Whannell & Whannell, 2015, p. 46).

It is also critical to a STEPS student's identity as to how staff treat incidences of student failure, both in the university context and prior ones such as school. ACs can help students see fails or withdrawals in a positive light, as a learning experience, not as a personal failure and thus that failure is not part of their identity. They can also help the student to grow past previous negative experiences by seeing the positives and benefits. This is especially so in understanding that university (STEPS) is very different from school. This avoids the "self-fulfilling prophecy, based upon... previous negative experiences and teacher expectations, to negatively influence the performance of students" (Whannell & Whannell, 2015, p. 47).

It has been shown that this support must be central to the student experience, and not as a peripheral aspect (Kift, 2015). In STEPS, the AC is central to the entire student experience, meaning that there is complete integration between the administrative, support and academic facets of the students' experiences.

Methodology

All students were invited to complete anonymous surveys at the end of each term. While the questions are the same for all ACs, students complete the survey for the AC to which they are allocated depending on their enrolment. This paper analyses the responses for the Rockhampton campus and Distance Education. There were five questions in the survey and each prompted for a text response. Students could skip questions if they desired. The data were aggregated across five terms from Term 1, 2015 to Term 2, 2016.

A qualitative, thematic analysis was conducted where similar comments were grouped and themes identified. This allowed for trends to be shown across the types of responses. Responses with multiple themes were split without altering the wording of the comments. No comment was included in more than one theme. Once all comments were grouped, categories for each of the themes were identified. The data from the two campuses were analysed

separately for each of the questions and then compared. There was significant similarities between the categories identified for each campus, and hence the data were combined.

Results

The numbers and percentages of the comments were tallied for each category and are shown in Table 1. The data serves to show the types and range of comments from students around individualised student support and the importance of the AC role in an enabling program, as discussed below.

1. Was the application process, interview procedure and development of your Required Study Plan clear and appropriate for your needs as a student?		
	No. comments	% question responses
<i>Agreement</i>	53	41
<i>Good</i>	3	2
<i>Easy/smooth</i>	15	12
<i>Helpful, well explained</i>	25	19
<i>Friendly, comfortable</i>	8	6
<i>Study planning was good</i>	18	14
<i>Other</i>	2	2
<i>General needs improvement</i>	1	1
<i>Study planning needs improvement</i>	5	4
Total comments (n)	130	
2. Did the Access Coordinator provide you with timely, helpful support throughout the term when it was asked for? (eg. Were your questions answered satisfactorily? Did you find the Access Coordinator to be approachable and open to your queries?)		
	No. comments	% question responses
<i>Agreement</i>	42	32
<i>General good/helpful</i>	31	24
<i>No specific assistance required</i>	9	7
<i>Quick</i>	18	14
<i>Friendly</i>	18	14
<i>Good information</i>	6	5
<i>Meetings</i>	5	4
<i>Improvement</i>	2	2
Total comments (n)	131	
3. Did the weekly instructional emails from the Access Coordinator assist you with your study?		
	No. comments	% question responses
<i>Agreement</i>	48	31
<i>Didn't need help/emails</i>	11	7
<i>Liked it</i>	12	8
<i>Helpful</i>	54	35

<i>Assessment knowledge</i>	14	9
<i>Fun/interesting</i>	9	6
<i>No/not</i>	5	3
Total comments (n)	153	
4. Do you have any suggestions for ways in which the Access Coordinator could improve in their engagement with students?		
	No. comments	% question responses
<i>No/none</i>	54	52
<i>General good</i>	22	21
<i>Helpful/thoughtful/engaging/approachable</i>	17	16
<i>General improvement</i>	8	8
<i>Schedule/appointments improvement</i>	3	3
Total comments (n)	104	
5. Do you have any general comments about your STEPS experience with your Access Coordinator?		
	No. comments	% question responses
<i>No comments</i>	11	11
<i>STEPS comments</i>	23	23
<i>Good job</i>	39	38
<i>Easy to talk to</i>	5	5
<i>Specific help</i>	18	18
<i>More help for future</i>	2	2
<i>Issues</i>	4	4
Total comments (n)	102	

Table 1: Thematic analysis of AC survey response data

Discussion

The thematic analysis enabled an overarching look at the trends in the types of comments students gave. It was closer inspection of the comments that allowed insights into the sorts of ways the students found ACs helpful. This aligned well with the needs of the students as identified in the literature.

Preparedness

The literature showed that typically students coming into this sort of course are not well prepared for university study. ACs help students to be more prepared and manage their expectations. The results showed 95% positive comments for question 1: that application process, interview procedure and development of their study plan was clear and appropriate for their needs as a student. 41% simply agreed, 19% said the AC was helpful and 14% said the study planning was good. Example comments are: “I was a little confused going in but [AC] made the whole STEPS application process very easy to understand”; “all of the required information was easily accessed and all questions were answered quickly”; “I was

very pleased that the application process was straight forward and every question or concern I had was explained clearly to me”; “helpful in what to expect and what was expected of me”.

Timely support

From the literature, there was need shown that support needs to come at the right time. The constant communication from the AC and availability of the AC at any time meant that the students responded that the support was timely. The results of question 2 show 98% positive comments that the support given was timely and helpful. 32% simply agreed, and 14% specifically mentioned the support being quick. Students commented: “I would like to say a BIG THANK YOU to [AC] for all her support and timely advice during the term”; “always reachable and responds to any queries in a quick and timely manner”; “timing was impeccable”; “[AC] has always responded to me in a very quick manner”; “I only required email communication and found [AC’s] responses to always be timely”; “upon request I was immediately given time to talk through any issues I was faced with”.

Support was tailored/individual

The literature also showed that even if the support was timely, it also needed to be specific to the individual needs of the student. Through the enrolment process and consistent presence of the AC, the students felt that the AC understood and could cater to their individual needs. In question 2, 32% agreed support was timely and helpful, 24% said it was specifically good/helpful. In question 5, 94% gave positive feedback on the AC and 18% said they received specific help. Students stated that: “she has the knowledge to offer suggestions that may not have been thought about before”; “you have been so very helpful understanding and supportive of my personal situation trying to study with 4 children under the age of 7”; “she’s always available and clear in what she helps students with because she is understanding of each student”.

ACs demystified the university and processes

While the ACs offered individual support they also helped students navigate through processes, understand what study involved and learn about the university. This made the journey easier for the students. In question 1, 14% said study planning was good, 12% said the process was easy or smooth. Students highlighted the ACs helped them with learning the processes or about university: “The application process was much simpler than I was expecting it to be”; “I felt as if it was all appropriate and constructive in learning as a student”; “I found all three steps to enrolment extremely easy with [AC]”; “I feel like STEPS is a good way for future university students to be able to learn the way university runs”.

Sense of connection/engagement

In the literature, vital importance was placed on the need for students to have a sense of connection or engagement with the university. In question 3, 97% said the weekly emails assisted with study. 31% simply agreed, 8% liked the emails, and 35% found the emails helpful. In question 4, 89% commented that they could not suggest any ways for the AC to

increase engagement. Across the survey, students mentioned connection and engagement: “she has been exceptionally helpful and inspirational at times throughout this journey and has made me feel like someone is out there rooting for me to come through this journey, keeping track of my progress and this has really helped me being a Distance student”; “thank you for making me feel connected to the uni”; “the emails help me to feel more connected thank-you”; “engaging beautifully with students”; “I believe that the Access Coordinator did well in the way she engaged with students and helped them with their studies”.

Staff approachability

An important part of the engagement was the approachability of the lecturers and staff. This was shown in the results where in question 1, 6% said the AC was friendly or made them feel comfortable, and in question 2, 14% said the AC was friendly. For example: “[AC] was very approachable”; “was extremely easy to communicate with”; “friendly and put [me] at ease”; “it made me feel much more comfortable to begin my next step”; “I felt comfortable and welcomed”; “I have found that the [AC] is very approachable and seems to make time for students whenever she can”.

Other issues

A number of other issues were raised in the literature and students in this study confirmed that the AC was able to help them overcome these issues that otherwise may have meant they withdrew from their study. It was commented that the ACs helped student deal with anxiety: “[AC] put my mind (and nerves) at ease”; “I felt like someone was on my side shouting from the sidelines to help me”. They also helped the students deal with interruptions, failure, and changes, and not to give up even in adverse situations: “I had a few health problems and also had a baby in the time I completed STEPS and so needed to make changes to my study plan a few times. This was always done with ease and care”; “I have recently changed my Study Plan so I can pursue a different career pathway and [the AC] was very helpful and supportive”. This all contributed to students begin to identify as university students, an aspect shown to help students persevere through their study: “this journey has been awesome and I can't wait to continue to grow and develop as a student”.

Conclusion

This project shows that Access Coordinators are valuable in supporting students in the STEPS enabling course. This has been validated by institutional recognition via a Tier 1 Learning and Teaching Award for one AC who exemplified the practice of all ACs. Through the processes and support that are given to students as an integral part of their experience with STEPS, the ACs are shown to provide timely and individual assistance to the students and help the students feel engaged with the university. This helps relieve students’ anxieties and mean that they are well prepared for university study, no matter what their background or familial experiences are with higher education. There is emerging research around the success and retention of STEPS graduates in higher education (Pitman & Trinidad, 2016). The role of the AC is embedded into the administration, academic, and pastoral care aspects

of the course, and do not sit outside of the academic environment. ACs are able to deal with some of the issues raised in Pitman's report on enabling programs across Australia, including greater information about the course, pathway choices and "more foundational knowledge for degrees" (Pitman & Trinidad, 2016, p. 74). This gives students a sense of consistency and cohesion in an otherwise complex and daunting environment.

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