

Catch me before I fail: A proactive advising approach supporting first assessment success

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Abstract

The University of Southern Queensland has developed a practitioner led third space advising approach to support commencing students to transition into their studies successfully. This approach utilises the submission of the first assessment item as a catalyst for proactive outreach. The design of this outreach includes initial collaboration with academic staff to understand student learning needs and identify assessment support resources. An inclusive developmental advising and coaching approach is then used to outreach to students before and after submission of the first assessment item to develop student-directed solutions to build academic and personal capabilities and persistence. Findings show that this approach has an impact on assessment submission, successful course completion, and achievement.

Introduction

Monitoring the transition in process and designing critical first encounters that mitigate students' barriers to learning while strengthening their enablers has been found to be essential in supporting the long term success of commencing students (Nelson et al., 2017). At the University of Southern Queensland (UniSQ) this work is led by a centralised professional team, Student Success Advising (SSA), who use learning analytics to identify and prioritise students who would benefit from developmental support. The team instigates proactive outreach utilising advising techniques to re-engage students, build effective study behaviours, and support wellbeing.

Advising encompasses several terms such as academic advising, coaching, personal tutoring, and personal advising. It serves as a comprehensive strategy to promote student success by actively supporting academic, pastoral, and social development (Picton et al., 2024). This approach includes providing guidance in academic literacies, goal setting, problem-solving, and addressing student wellbeing (Picton et al., 2024). In recent times, advising has expanded its focus to align conceptually with learning and teaching, particularly within the realm of third space practice (Veles et al., 2023). Studies have indicated that advising has a positive impact on various aspects of student success such as attendance, engagement, achievement, and employment outcomes (Stuart et al., 2019). Common principles can be found across different advising models, which can be broadly categorized as follows: inclusive (structured, accessible, and guiding), personalized and integrated (welcoming, connected, and proactive), developmental (skilful, knowledgeable, and monitored), and student-centred (challenging, reflective, and engaging) (McIntosh, 2019). These principles are utilised by tertiary institutions using different student advising approaches.

The UniSQ SSA team has developed an advising approach that utilises various advising skills to support commencing students. This approach is showcased through the pilot of an early transition in proactive outreach intervention focused on commencing student submission of the first assessment item. This pilot was chosen to evaluate the efficacy of the advising model as submission of the first assessment item is one of the first extrinsic measures that students use to validate their identity as a successful university student and is fundamental to a student's sense of belonging, engagement, and transition into a university environment (Lizzio & Wilson, 2013; Picton et al., 2018). Moreover, although this intervention is established at many tertiary institutions (Lizzio & Wilson, 2013; Linden, 2022), there is little research into the advising skills that are used by practitioners in this space. Thus, the practitioner model of advising described in this paper can be utilised to inform the wider implementation of advising practices in the sector.

To evaluate the efficacy of the advising approach, the goals of the pilot were to accurately identify commencing students in Semester 2 of 2023 who were not engaged with their studies, mitigate the experience, and support them to get back on track to complete their course. The practical application of the first assessment submission intervention pilot combined and contextualised previous work from Lizzio and Wilson (2013) and Linden (2022). Firstly, the SSA team focused on developing academic staff participation in the design stage of the intervention. This was followed by identifying and outreaching to students with little or no Learning Management System (LMS) access and students who were late enrolled prior to the submission due date. Finally, students who did not submit or failed their first assessment item were identified and followed up via proactive phone outreach.

Stage One: Integrated Advising

As Linden (2022) notes, the success of intervening with students after submission of the first assessment is reliant on academic staff participation. The ability to build on social capital to form key partnerships and strong relationships with academic staff is integral to work in the third space that traverses the boundaries between academic and professional roles (McIntosh & Nutt, 2022; Veles et al., 2023). The integrated advisor is thus across the multiple factors that influence student success and can work across academic and administrative silos to break down barriers for students (McIntosh & Nutt, 2022).

This is evident in the collaboration between the SSA team and discipline based academic staff. This process began by developing shared purpose and commonality of goals with discipline based executive staff members, which led to the selection of nine first-year courses across six discipline areas, including Business, Creative Arts, Humanities & Communication, Mathematics, Physics & Computing, Psychology & Wellbeing, and Surveying & Built Environment (Veles et al., 2023). These courses were selected based on the agreed criteria of having high numbers of commencing students, being high stakes (core compulsory courses), and having high attrition.

The intervention was then socialised with the teaching team in each course by identifying a belief in the value of the student experience as a shared purpose that facilitated focus on the process and outcomes of the collaborative practice (Veles et al., 2023). This led to authentic discussions with the teaching team around pain points for students in the course, a shared

understanding of the content specific learning and assessment preparation resources to support students, and agreement on communication methods and timelines.

Acknowledging that trust building takes time, closing the feedback loop with the teaching team and with the discipline based executive staff members, was an essential component of the intervention. This took the form of communications and conversations centred on supporting individual students, information about the outcomes of each stage of the intervention, and communicating patterns identified through the data. This shared purpose and establishment of trust facilitated conversations among academic and advising staff where student feedback on course design and assessment could be shared to influence improvements in student's learning experience and engagement within the course (Veles et al., 2023).

Stage Two: Developmental Advising

Encouraging students with little or no Learning Management System (LMS) access prior to the submission due date, including students who enrolled late, to access their study materials was central to the second stage of the intervention. Analysis of student learning behaviours in the UniSQ LMS prior to the assessment due date showed that if a student's activity was below 30% of the mean activity of the course, they were three times more likely to fail than other students. This is supported by Linden (2022), who found that not accessing the LMS for a 10-day period is an indicator of student disengagement. Nudging techniques (Lawrence, 2021) and email campaigns (Linden, 2022) have been found to be effective in encouraging student engagement with the LMS. The SSA team trialled a more participatory approach by calling each student to develop a program of action designed to engage them with their course.

This outreach was initially considered intrusive, as students were deliberately contacted through the early identification and problematisation of possible academic difficulty and encouraged to disclose why they had not been actively participating in the course. Earl (1988) describes this style of Intrusive Advising as a "deliberate intervention to enhance motivation" (p. 27). However, once the team began conversations with students, it became clear the approach taken was much more developmental than intrusive, and an alternative advising strategy definition was sought. It was noted that the advisor and the student worked together to address barriers to learning, resulting in referrals for additional support including educational, career, and personal issues (Grites, 2013). Often one issue would affect the others, creating barriers that hindered student success (Lowenstein, 1999).

To mitigate these barriers to success, the advisor must be informed of the content specific learning and assessment preparation resources within the course, and skilled in identifying the factors that result in students not accessing the LMS. The advisor then collaborates with the student to set specific goals based on their developmental needs (Creamer & Creamer, 1994). For example, not accessing the LMS may be due to the student being busy at work. Advice on an administrative process to apply for an extension prior to the assessment due date requires a problem-solving approach that results in an immediate resolution. However, by using developmental advising techniques to encourage self-awareness and critical thinking, an underlying development issue may be identified, resulting in a referral to a Counsellor for assistance with procrastination and time management (Creamer & Creamer, 1994; McIntosh, 2019). Similarly, students who disclosed they were not accessing the LMS because they lacked interest in the content or were not sure if they had chosen the correct course of study were

provided information on how to withdraw from the course to avoid a fail grade. While this immediately assisted the student, the use of a developmental approach supported the student to reflect on their reasons for choosing the course (Creamer & Creamer, 1994; McIntosh, 2019). This could result in increased engagement with the content when their goals aligned or reveal low motivation due to the ambiguity of their career goals. Where the student's goals were not aligned with their studies, a referral to the Career Counselling team to further develop their self-awareness assisted students to make sound career decisions and set study goals.

In both these examples, the SSA followed up with the student based on their learning behaviours, such as attending their support appointment or submitting their first assessment item. This systematic monitoring of learning behaviours kept the SSA in touch with the student and their development needs (Creamer & Creamer, 1994; McIntosh, 2019). Therefore, the advisor's skilful conversations, breadth of institutional knowledge, and monitoring of student development was considered a developmental approach in this stage of the intervention (McIntosh, 2019).

Stage Three: Coaching Advising

Stage Three of the intervention involved proactive phone outreach targeting students who did not submit or failed their first assessment item. To identify students who submitted, passed, or failed the first assessment item, SSAs accessed students' learning records in the LMS. This access also identified students who were not regularly engaged with their course content or students who were not accessing LMS content critical for the second assessment item, such as the assessment task sheet. This stage of the intervention was essential, as not submitting or failing the first assessment is linked to high rates of student attrition affecting both students' academic performance and motivation to remain studying (Lizzio & Wilson, 2013).

Reaching out for support after a setback like first assessment failure may seem daunting for a first-year student, even though most universities have a plethora of support services. This is because students may feel embarrassed seeking support, judged by their peers, or concerned about being disadvantaged (Clegg et al., 2006). Paradoxically, students in most need of support are least likely to access it (Ciarrochi et al., 2002; Lizzio & Wilson, 2013). Therefore, identifying and proactively outreaching to students at this critical time is linked to student success and higher rates of student retention (Nelson et al., 2012). This is achieved by empowering students to connect with the appropriate support services, including their teaching team, prior to their second assessment by assisting them to access individual tailored support services based on their circumstances (Lizzio & Wilson, 2013). Students can then connect with the support to develop the skills they require for their second assessment to successfully pass the course (Lizzio & Wilson, 2013).

To facilitate this, SSAs making calls have been trained in professional leadership coaching, which is a postmodern strengths-based communication approach (Stelter, 2009). Coaching evolved from the Carl Rogers person-centred approach where people are the expert of their life and have their own solutions (Joseph, 2006). Using probing questions, staff assisted students to articulate a vision of their future success: What is their future goal? What do they want to become? Who will notice? What change will this bring to their life? This self-reflection revisits the student's motivation for studying (Rosengren, 2017). SSAs can then provide a space for the student to explore their success and articulate their future vision. The coaching training changed

advising conversations from a culture of directive support to a student-centred, personalised approach of co-creating student goals and needs (Picton et al., 2024). Taking an authentic interest in the student experience facilitated connection. By utilising communication skills such as empathic responding, paraphrasing and reflection, students were supported to lead the conversation, which resulted in students feeling acknowledged and heard (Egan & Reece, 2019).

Coaching conversations also reflected the inherent strength in a student's capabilities. By complimenting students on their strengths and articulating them, an SSA could assist a student to develop self-knowledge of their strengths, such as resilience, tenacity, or determination (Soria & Stubblefield, 2015). This approach created open discussions allowing students to reflect on what they needed to succeed, leveraging their strengths, and subsequently tailoring support. Coaching conversations worked to instil a sense of hope for future success where the student may not have seen this in the past (Lefdahl-Davis et al., 2018). Instead of analysing what went wrong with their assessment in detail to fix their problem, a solution focused and awareness raising approach was utilised (Lochtie et al., 2018). This was an opportunity to discuss the students' own resources as well as university services, providing students with a curated choice of support that was highly personalised. Staff might brainstorm options with a student, challenging how this might work in relation to their circumstances, and empowered the student with a choice of options. This also encouraged ongoing reflective practice to develop learner autonomy (McIntosh, 2019). This led to warm handovers to other university support services such as Counselling or Academic Learning Advisor support with SSAs directly transferring calls to other services that the student acknowledged would lead to their success. This helped guide students to engage in clarifying and elaborating on their understanding of the causes of their underperformance, enabling them to self-regulate, and to commit to a practical action plan (Lizzio & Wilson, 2013).

Methods and findings

Analysis of the first assessment pilot includes commencing undergraduate student learning data captured in Semester 2 of 2023 (n4310) and focuses on the learning behaviours of 1411 students enrolled within the 9 courses selected. Ethics approval was sought from the UniSQ Human Ethics Committee (HREC ETH2024-0198) via the low-risk pathway. The requirement for consent was waived and all data was anonymised before analysis.

In Stage Two: Developmental Advising, the SSA team identified 196 students (14% of students within the 9 courses selected) who had late enrolled, or who had no or low LMS access prior to the first assessment submission. Of the students who engaged in a phone conversation (n79), 72% (n57) of students went on to submit their assessment and an additional 14% (n11) withdrew from the course without academic or financial penalty. The remaining students did not answer the call and so were contacted via email (n117). Of these students, only 59% (n69) went on to submit their first assessment item and 21% (n24) withdrew from the course. This demonstrates that students who engaged in a developmental style phone call were more likely to persist and submit their assessment.

In Stage Three of the pilot, Coaching Advising, 157 students (11% of students within the 9 courses selected) were identified as not submitting or failing their first assessment and were contacted by phone and email. Of these students, 50% (n78) went on to submit their second

assessment and 13% (n21) withdrew from the course without academic penalty. Further analysis of the data showed that when students engaged in a coaching style phone conversation with an SSA (n60), the submission rate increased to 60% (n36) and those who withdrew from the course without academic penalty increased to 18% (n11). This was replicated in overall course grades, where students who had a coaching conversation were more likely to successfully complete and pass the course (42%, n25) than students who did not have a conversation (27%, n26). Moreover, in cases where students were coached on applying for an extension because of medical or family reasons and connected with support appropriate to their needs (n24), the overall pass rate increased to 58% (n14).

Analysis of overall progression rates (number of students passed) / (number of students enrolled, excluding withdrawn retrospectively & temporary grades) across seven courses involved in the intervention was also conducted. Noting that two courses were excluded from this count as they had no previous iteration. The overall progression rate of students in the courses in the intervention (n806) was 85%, compared to 82% in the comparable courses in the previous study period (n922).

A descriptive analysis of the student sentiment collected during the intervention was also conducted. Descriptive analysis is useful in capturing the scope and complexity of the student experience and in identifying relationships between factors through the voice of participants (Beer & Lawson, 2017). SSAs recorded brief notes related to the student's experience during Stage 2 (n88) and Stage 3 (n71) of the intervention. These notes were downloaded, de-identified, and subjected to a manual thematic qualitative analysis. Themes included in the analysis were derived from the work of Beer and Lawson (2017), who described fifteen themes related to student's self-reported reasons for attrition. In both Stage Two and Stage Three of the intervention, over a third of students indicated struggling with time management due to work commitments and explicitly mentioned both: *"I have been very busy at work and have had no time to complete it"* (Psychology & Wellbeing Student). In many of these instances, SSAs assisted students to submit an extension request and discussed support with time management: *"I'll be okay now to submit with the extension"* (Business Student). Another theme identified in the sentiment was the need for institutional support. This was actioned via referrals to support services, including Career Advisors for support with developing a sense of purpose, Learning Advisors and Peer Assisted Study Sessions for assistance with a sense of capability, Welfare Advisors for financial assistance, and direct problem-solving assistance with institutional administrative processes. As one student said, *"I was feeling pretty low on motivation, so I appreciated reviewing career goals and the contact details for Career Counselling"* (Surveying & Built Environment Student). A difference between outreach stages was an increase in referrals for support related to health in Stage Three: *"I've had three funerals this week and my kids have been sick"* (Surveying & Built Environment Student). The final theme identified was feedback on course and assessment design, such as *"I thought the forum posts were the portfolio tasks! Thanks for helping me to find the assessment"* (Humanities & Communication Student). Overall, the majority of students appreciated the institutional and academic support, for example, *"I'm enjoying my course and the support is amazing, thank you for checking in"* (Mathematics, Physics & Computing Student).

Academic staff sentiment was also collected through unsolicited written communications (n10). This collection of sentiment is valuable because it acknowledges staff as co-creators and participants in the intervention and as experts of their own experiences (Vallianatos, 2015).

These communications were manually analysed to identify three emerging themes. The primary theme was a general appreciation of the intervention and the work of the SSA team, as noted by a lecturer in the School of Psychology and Wellbeing, *“It looks like the outreach is extremely successful so thank you for your... efforts!”*. The second theme was on the quality of the communication of feedback from students and its influence on student’s learning and engagement within the course, as one academic said, *“It was interesting to see the feedback about the portfolio with the different due dates. I will be rectifying that in future offerings to ensure the assessment is more streamlined for students”* (School of Humanities and Communication). A final theme was the emphasis on the collaborative nature of the work, *“Tremendous work done by your team. The score of the mid-term survey for [the course] is high (4.3). I believe this was possible by putting all efforts of your team and the course teaching team together!”* (Lecturer, School of Mathematics, Physics, and Computing).

Discussion and recommendations

This analysis of the advising approach used in the three stages of the intervention to support students with submitting and passing the first assessment demonstrates the importance of proactive, integrated, developmental, and coaching advising. This is evidenced through the positive impact on commencing at risk student submission of the first and second assessment item, increased pass rates after engaging in an advising conversation, and in the 3% overall lift in course progression rates. Based on the data analysed here and the strong research evidence base that describes improvements in course completion and commencing student retention rates (Linden, 2022; Lizzio & Wilson, 2013; Picton et al., 2018), it is likely that the advising approach used will subsequently positively impact student’s overall achievement, retention and completion rates when implemented to scale across the institution. While some of the gains described above can be considered modest, it is important to appreciate the relative nature of success when proactively intervening with disengaged students. Gains of this nature can therefore be considered significant when positioned within the broader context of increasing the persistence of students who experience complex barriers to learning.

The advising approach used at each stage of the intervention was critical to its success, starting with the formation of positive collaborative interactions with academic staff, including faculty leaders and members of the teaching team. Likewise, in the developmental and coaching advising phases, the SSA team found that building capital with students through positive strengths-based interactions meant that the objectives of mitigating the student’s experience of failing and supporting students to get back on track to complete their course were met. In these stages, the comprehensive contextualised knowledge of the third space advisor was essential in the provision of personalised and targeted support appropriate to the unique and diverse needs of each student. It is through this development of trusting staff and student relationships, that the data, insights, and learnings from the intervention informed course improvement.

As a result, a recommendation for the sector is to invest in the appropriate training for advising staff to maximise expertise in the student centred coaching and developmental advising approach. SSAs who undertook the calls in this intervention were highly trained specialists in their field, which contributed to the socialisation of the intervention and the formation of positive relationships with staff and student stakeholders, especially when there was push back or lack of engagement. This demonstrates that the specialised skills and knowledges of third space practitioners are essential to student success strategies focused on retention, achievement,

and progression. To showcase this, advising staff at UniSQ are being encouraged to pursue professional accreditations such as the AdvanceHE Fellowship. This will support the professional recognition of third space expertise and increase social capital in forming respectful, collaborative, and trusting relationships that underpin the success of this work.

One of the pain points of the intervention was the manual and labour-intensive data recording, tracking and analysis involved across multiple systems. In order to implement the intervention to scale, these data requirements need to be addressed. This process has started at UniSQ with the development of a student advising dashboard to consolidate and automate student learning analytics data to capture consistent, repeatable, and reportable data that feeds into insights on individual learning behaviour. The development of this fully scheduled, data driven information flow will assist the identification of students who may benefit from additional support. The analysis conducted here demonstrates that identifying and intervening with students with low or no LMS access and at the point of non-submission or failure of the first assessment item can positively affect student success within the UniSQ context. Including these data points within the development of the dashboard will enable the SSA team to proactively outreach at scale to priority students to provide targeted support that is timely and highly personalised. Thus, it is recommended that institutions engaging in similar proactive and targeted interventions prioritise systems capabilities that include a focus on the first assessment item.

The recommendations of the Australian Universities Accord (Department of Education, 2024) are a timely opportunity to explore the ways in which student cohorts are impacted by proactive advising. This study paves the foundation for further research in this area, particularly in the development of interventions that can be performed at scale and as part of a holistic suite of success advising that is based on the development of persistence by monitoring key student learning behaviours.

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