StudyLink: A case study of an enabling program supporting the transition to the first year of University

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The first year is widely acknowledged as a critical period in determining a students' success at University. However, the period immediately prior to commencing University is also critical. Lack of adequate preparation and realistic expectations continue to be factors in student withdrawal and dissatisfaction with the student experience. These issues are likely to be magnified as Universities strive to meet participation and equity targets in the wake of the Bradley Review of Higher Education.

This paper reports on the design, implementation and evaluation of StudyLink, a large scale enabling program at Charles Sturt University. Designed to enhance the first year experience by facilitating students' academic transition to University, StudyLink has had over 27,000 enrolments since its inception. StudyLink has been rigorously evaluated and provides a benchmark for sustainable and scalable delivery of high quality University preparation programs. In 2009 StudyLink was recognised with an Australian Learning and Teaching Council Citation and Program Award for the First Year Experience.

Background

Charles Sturt University (CSU) is a large regional multi-campus University. The student profile is particularly diverse with more than 70% of students studying by distance education and more than 50% of students represented in equity categories (low SES, rural/remote, disability, ATSI). Many are also first generation University students, have experienced educational disadvantage, or have had significant gaps in their education. Well before social inclusion and widening participation became prominent on the Government's educational reform agenda (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008), CSU committed to a strategy to ensure equitable participation and success for all students. In accordance with the view that access without support is not opportunity a comprehensive academic preparation program was seen as a critical part of this strategy, hence the development of the StudyLink enabling program.

Program description

Study Link is an enabling program which has demonstrated a sustained capacity to positively influence the first year experience of students at CSU. The Study Link program consists of eighteen self paced, non credit bearing subjects aimed at building confidence, skills and knowledge in a supportive environment prior to commencing University. Designed to enhance the first year experience by facilitating students' academic transition to University study, the program is free of charge to Commonwealth supported students enrolled at CSU. Study Link is also available on a fee paying basis for any students wishing to develop skills and confidence in preparation for study at other Universities. No

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differentiation is made between CSU students and non CSU students in terms of subject materials, facilitation or interaction. StudyLink is offered continuously throughout the year so students may enrol at their point of need and when their motivation for learning is at its highest, however, students are encouraged to complete subjects between University enrolment and commencement of their first academic session. StudyLink subjects are short and manageable (13 – 40 hours) and self paced, allowing students flexibility to manage their learning in conjunction with existing commitments while having the full support of a facilitator who is readily available to every student.

Eighteen subjects are currently included in the StudyLink program. These include some that cover generic skills such as Skills for Learning Online, Academic Skills Development, English Skills, those that prepare students for entry into a particular discipline such as Transition to Policing, Information Technology or Nursing Studies, and those that have been designed to specifically prepare students to succeed in high attrition degree subjects such as Mathematics for Calculus, Introductory Physics and Chemistry.

Program aims

The aim of the StudyLink program is similar to that of many enabling programs across the sector, that is, to enable students to develop foundational skills, knowledge and understandings in preparation for tertiary study (Anderson, 2007; Muldoon, O'Brien, Pendreigh & Wijeyewardene, 2009; Ramsay, 2007). In addition, StudyLink aims to allow students to make informed decisions as to their current level of readiness for tertiary study, to provide students with the opportunity to sample tertiary study in a supportive and non-threatening learning environment and to support improved retention rates and academic progress. Successful completion of StudyLink subjects does not provide guaranteed entry to CSU, nor credit towards a degree. Successful completion does however assist students demonstrate their academic eligibility for entry to CSU programs, for instance the Associate Degree in Policing Practice. This is particularly relevant to those students with gaps in their education who often have no other way of indicating academic potential to succeed within a tertiary environment.

Student utilisation

The StudyLink program has experienced enormous growth since its inception. The program began in 1998 with 457 enrolments in 6 subjects offered once each year. Over a decade later, StudyLink has been developed to a suite of 18 subjects offered continuously throughout the year with an enrolment of more than 27,000 students to date. The program has not only been successful in meeting its objectives, it has proven to be a resource efficient and sustainable model.

In addition to providing essential preparation for CSU students, several Universities also direct their students to StudyLink to assist their preparation and some accept successful completion in subjects such as Introductory Chemistry as a criteria for entry to their degree courses.

Program delivery

A guiding factor in the development of StudyLink was to ensure that equivalent opportunities for University preparation were available to distance education students as to those studying on campus. Increasing numbers of students are mature aged and already in the workforce, so the ability to develop skills for successful study whilst maintaining existing responsibilities is critical. The StudyLink program in this respect is a social justice initiative.

The potential pitfalls of studying by distance education are well known. Feelings of isolation, loneliness and lack of motivation are reasons commonly cited for lack of persistence among those choosing this mode of study (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap 2003; McInnerney & Roberts, 2004). These issues can be further magnified for those commencing study without adequate preparation. By participating in an enabling program via distance education, students not only develop skills for studying via distance education, but also build important links with fellow students and the University community. Flexible delivery of enabling subjects provides students with real-life and authentic exposure to what learning via distance is like, setting realistic expectations and the foundation for a positive first year experience. The following student comments demonstrate students' appreciation of a program such as StudyLink being made accessible to them. *"Thank you for making this accessible to me. I think CSU has done a wonderful job…it definitely enables distance education students to feel that they are an integral part of the University."* and *"Distance education can be an isolating experience. The support and encouragement which the staff offer, and continue to offer once the connection through Study Link is complete is phenomenal."*

Program administration

StudyLink began over a decade ago as an initiative within the Division of Student Services and was administered completely within this organisational unit. However, the fast uptake by students and the clear potential for expansion meant it was sensible to mainstream the program into broader University wide organizational structures, including subject approval and administrative processes, educational design, production and despatch and evaluation systems. StudyLink is now considered 'core' CSU activity rather than an exception ensuring that processes and systems are not duplicated. While this level of mainstreaming ensures high levels of quality control and organisational efficiencies, it also provides important consistency for students. StudyLink processes (e.g. enrolment, student contact, assignment submission) mirror those of the rest of the University providing important familiarity and consistency for students as they commence their first year. This method also allows students the opportunity to make important contacts and become aware of support available prior to commencing their formal subjects. Students have the opportunity to gain experience with administrative processes such as electronic assignment submission with no risk of affecting formal grades. The following student feedback received via the online subject evaluation process demonstrates the benefits of the mainstreaming approach, providing valuable opportunities to experience the University environment as well as developing skills prior to commencing a degree.

> *"The subject taught me about academic writing, the most important aspect in assignment writing. It also taught me about resources at CSU…it gave me practice on online communication, accessing important forums, EASTS assignment submission and confidence in using my computer which has*

impressed my teenage children, who now ask for my assistance. I am better prepared for the 4 years part time study after doing the StudyLink course."

Many of the StudyLink subjects are written and taught by members of the Learning Skills team as part of their core activity. This is seen as an efficient and sustainable use of their time given the numbers of students utilising the program. Discipline specific subjects are taught by contracted 'experts' but coordinated within the Learning Skills Team.

Program design

While the discipline content of each StudyLink subject varies greatly, common principles of design underpinned the development of each subject. The Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education (Chickering & Gamson, 1987) were fundamental in the program design as were the tenets of adult learning theory, or andragogy, as espoused by Knowles (1975) with the key features being interaction, task centeredness, individualisation and self – directedness.

There is wide agreement that student preparedness impacts greatly on the first year experience (Kift, 2009; Krause Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005, Yorke & Longden, 2008). The StudyLink program aims to respond to this identified need, but does so within the CSU context which is unique in many respects. Given most students at CSU study by distance education and are expected to utilise the online environment to do so, preparing students for success in this type of learning concurrently with supporting key skill development was seen as critical to ensuring a smooth academic transition within the first year. Although the development of the StudyLink program predates the recently developed First Year Curriculum Principles (Kift, 2009), it is heartening to note that the program aligns well with the suggested transition pedagogy. For example, Kift suggests that curriculum should explicitly assist students' transition from their previous educational experience to what is required at University and ultimately into their professional discipline. This principle is explicitly attended to in the Subject Skills for learning Online and its focus on the development of digital literacy in the context of the University learning environment.

Born in the mid 1980s and later, the students known as Generation Y are common amongst the current CSU student cohort. Having grown up with technology, these 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001) are assumed to enter University equipped with the necessary digital literacy to succeed in their studies. However, caution here is required. As stated previously, a significant proportion of CSU students are represented in DEEWR equity categories. These student groups have also been identified as most at risk of becoming part of the 'digital divide' and not accessing online technologies (Barakeet, Payne, Scott & Cameron, 2000; Bell et al, 2002; National Office for the Information Economy, 2001; Oliver & Towers, 2000). There are also large numbers of students, including mature aged students, who despite having access to technology, do not possess the digital literacy skills necessary to succeed within the current higher education context.

In order to ensure these groups are not disadvantaged, the StudyLink subject, Skills for Learning Online, plays a particularly crucial student support role in the move from traditional delivery methods to an online environment. By situating the StudyLink program within the same online learning environment (CSU Interact), used in CSU degrees, students are able to experience the particular modes of interaction and instruction that will be expected of them in their degree. The use of technology in an educational setting is often not intuitive or natural

to those from backgrounds of educational disadvantage, so this opportunity is important to build skills and confidence in a supported environment.

Student feedback gathered from subject evaluations of the StudyLink subject Skills for Learning Online (copied below) highlight the value of this initiative, especially for those students studying by distance education or who are 'new' to technology use. *"I found it extremely informative. Can't fathom how any student in this new information age could survive without the skills taught in this course – well done CSU!"* and *"The skills I have acquired over the past weeks I now take for granted. I am sure after taking this subject that I will not be afraid to take part in chats and the forums and to use the net as a most useful source of information. I now have renewed hope in doing well in my studies next year."*
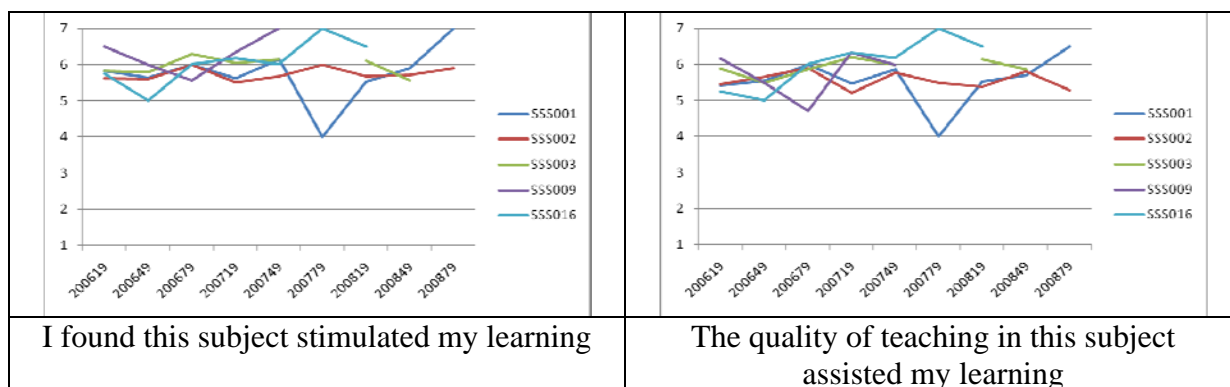
StudyLink is completely integrated with all CSU academic and administrative systems so that students experience identical enrolment, assessment submission and learning environment conditions well before they are faced with the cognitive load of their degree subjects. All StudyLink subjects are situated within *CSU Interact*, CSU's online learning environment which allows a constructivist approach to learning. Immersed in *CSU Interact*, students encounter an authentic and engaging learning environment within which they access their learning materials and resources. Aligning with Kift's principle of engagement (2009) the learning design of StudyLink subjects supports participation in learning activities that involve students in communication, cooperation and collaborative learning with other students, facilitating the active construction of knowledge. The use of online forums in all subjects encourages peer-to-peer support and collaboration, while assessment schemes have been designed to provide early and formative feedback to students, providing early opportunities for success, a significant issue in student motivation and ensuring a positive first year experience.

Evaluation

The StudyLink program has been rigorously evaluated and provides a benchmark for the sustainable and scalable delivery of high quality University preparation programs. Student and staff feedback, utilisation and retention rates point to the success of StudyLink in increasing skills, knowledge and confidence, and positively influencing the first year experience. The StudyLink program is systematically evaluated on many fronts as part of a commitment to continuous improvement. Methods include participation in the University wide online evaluation of subjects scheme, informal evaluation and gathering of student feedback throughout each individual subject; the use of external grants for specific evaluation projects, tracking of student enrolments and progress rates, and most recently the commissioning of an external evaluative review.

Online Evaluation of subjects

All subjects within the StudyLink program participate in the formal University Wide Online Evaluation of Subjects Scheme. Formal student feedback collected by CSU's Evaluation Unit from 5 subjects over 9 trimesters demonstrates that on average, students strongly agree (6) that the subjects stimulated their learning and the quality of teaching assisted their learning (see graphs below where 1= very strongly disagree and 7 = very strongly agree).

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| I found this subject stimulated my learning | The quality of teaching in this subject assisted my learning |

Figure 1: Student evaluations of subjects and teaching results for 5 StudyLink subjects over 9 trimesters

External evaluation grants

StudyLink has proven to have an enormous influence on student learning and their experience of University, with students directly attributing the program with increases in skills and knowledge. A longitudinal evaluation study of the StudyLink subject, Skills for Learning Online (SSS003), was carried out through a Committee for University Teaching and Staff Development (CUTSD) evaluation grant in 2000. Students who had completed Skills for Learning Online were surveyed regarding the long term benefits of completing the subject. 132 responses were received and the results are summarised in the following table.

Question	*Strongly disagree/ disagree*	*Strongly agree/agree*
Completing SSS003 increased my confidence in using the online environment		*100%*
Completing SSS003 increased my general self confidence in relation to commencing my first semester of study in my course at CSU	*7%*	*93%*
My skills level has increased as a result of studying SSS003	*1%*	*99%*
The skills learnt in SSS003 have assisted me in my first year of my course at CSU	*5%*	*95%*
Overall do you believe that studying SSS003 was of value to you in the rest of your course	*4%*	*96%*

Table 1: Student responses to questions relating to long term effectiveness of subject SSS003

Student feedback

While student feedback in isolation is not considered a rigorous enough method to provide evidence of a program's success (or lack thereof), taken in the context of several other evaluation instruments, student reflections are useful indicators of the effect a program has on the overall student experience. Student feedback has consistently reported increases in the areas of skills, confidence and knowledge as a result of completing the StudyLink program.

Confidence

StudyLink specifically aims to build student confidence, inspiring students to learn and go on to achieve success in their University studies. The following student comments gathered during the subject evaluation process are strikingly concurrent and support this view. *"Study*

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Link provided me with not only a background in chemistry and its cousin maths, but also doused my fear of both....I now feel confident I will cope well" and *"it had been a long time since I finished school but StudyLink gave me a great deal of confidence and advice on how to tackle my subjects"*

Skills and knowledge

Both students and staff report increases in skills and knowledge as a result of StudyLink participation, with many directly attributing the StudyLink program to their progress and success in their degree. The following student comments were collected during subject evaluations.*" I managed to get a Distinction in QBM117. ... I attribute this to the Study Link subject that I had done immediately prior to the main subject."* And *"Had I not completed Study Link Maths, I would not have coped with CHM 108, which I have just completed this last semester, with DI and HD assignment grades!"*

External Evaluative Review

According to Onsman, "few if any quantitatively-based evaluative reviews of bridging programs have been attempted in Australia or internationally. Primarily the reason for the paucity is the difficulty in establishing causal relationships between pre- and post-intervention scores and the intervention itself. " (Onsman, 2008. p.9)

While large amounts of internally generated data is available in relation the StudyLink program, in order to further the continuous improvement process and ensure the best outcomes for students, an external evaluation of the program was commissioned in 2008. The reviewer was allowed the flexibility to develop his own criteria to measure the programs' effectiveness and had access to any data he requested. The criteria used were:

1. Program objectives: does the program meet its stated objectives and will achieving the objectives actually prepare students for Tertiary study.
2. Student evaluations of teaching and learning within the program
3. Teachers' evaluation of the program (both teachers within and external to the program)
4. Student utilisation of the program
5. Ranking of program participants against the institution's aggregate completion rates.

In each of the criteria used to evaluate the program, the results were overwhelmingly positive. While student and staff responses were very favourable, they were not surprising as they closely mirrored existing feedback pointing to the influential role StudyLink has in supporting and enabling a successful transition to University study. What was reported within the evaluative review that had not been researched previously was the extent to which the StudyLink program influenced student attainment. The review found that "students who move into undergraduate programs by way of StudyLink achieve on average the same as standard entry students. Given that the pool of potential students from which StudyLink draws its participants are generally less confident of being able to complete a degree, the statistics are positively remarkable." (Onsman, 2008, p. 73) The review also found evidence that completion of StudyLink has a positive effect on student attrition rates, finding that non-StudyLink students abandon their studies at an average rate of 28.9% while those completing StudyLink attrited at the rate of 26.2%.

Discussion

While StudyLink has clearly been a successful initiative to support student transition to the first year at University, the outcomes and experiences of the program has raised many questions and issues for further consideration.

The first question is related to the enrolment and completion rates for the StudyLink program. As reported earlier in this paper, the enrolments for the StudyLink program have grown significantly since its inception in 1998. There is no doubt that increased marketing of the program, both within and outside the organisation, together with a broader choice of subjects and offerings has lead to the growing take up of StudyLink subjects. However anecdotal evidence also suggests students are so overwhelmed with information and forms when they receive their initial offer to university, that some unknowingly enrol in StudyLink without realising. This may account for the numbers of students who never make contact with their teachers or withdraw from the program. This begs the question – when is the most appropriate time to promote such enabling programs to students? Good practice suggests that communication be limited to what is immediately necessary and relevant during each stage of the transition process (QUT, 2009), and while the experience at CSU has shown that the ideal time for students to complete StudyLink is between enrolment and commencing their first official subjects, this is also a time of administrative information overload. The question of the most appropriate and timely way to inform students of the availability of programs such as StudyLink remains unanswered.

The completion rates for enabling programs in Australia (and elsewhere) remain below the sector average (DETYA, 2001; Ramsay, 2004) and in this respect Study Link is no different. Approximately one third of students who enrol in StudyLink officially withdraw or in some instances, never engage with the program at all. Like all attrition, the reasons are likely to be complex and multifaceted. Informal student and lecturer feedback has suggested many possible reasons for non completion including the following: unaware they had enrolled; realised they didn't need the course once the materials arrived; used the materials as resources but didn't wish to submit assessment items or formally complete the course. In addition to better preparing students for university, StudyLink aims to assist students make an informed choice as to whether they wish to pursue University studies. According to Onsman (2008) "a student who purposefully and deliberately abandons university study as a result of attending an enabling program ought to be counted as a successful outcome rather than a failure." No research exists to confirm whether those students abandoning StudyLink are also lost to the University or higher education in general. A formal follow up study to determine reasons for non completion of StudyLink would certainly be useful to determine the factors leading to the high attrition rates , whether any of these factors were within institutional control and in fact whether the 'positive attrition' Onsman speaks of is occurring within StudyLink.

Summary

If Universities are to address the current Government's social inclusion agenda and the associated targets resultant from the Bradley review, great care is required to ensure that with access to higher education comes appropriate support. StudyLink is an enabling program that actively supports students' academic transition to University, and demonstrates a positive influence on students' first year experience. The StudyLink program has provided a

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successful model of sustainable and scalable student support that utilises flexible delivery to facilitate enhanced participation and success in higher education for all students.

The benefits of the StudyLink program to students, and in turn the University are widespread, with more than 27,000 students having benefitted from the program since it began over a decade ago. The opportunity for students to develop essential skills, knowledge and confidence prior to commencing University assists the academic transition to University, in turn facilitating a positive first year experience. StudyLink has become an integral component of the student academic support program available at CSU, providing tangible and widespread benefits to students, the organisation, the higher education sector and the community in general.

The rigorous evaluation of the StudyLink program has provided evidence on many levels of the program's effectiveness and in doing so has provided an important benchmark for the higher education sector in first year experience programs. While further research into the completion rates of StudyLink students is warranted, the program will continue to play a central role in the support of students at Charles Sturt University.

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