

Invisible scissors: helping to cut the apron strings by engaging families and friends in the first year experience

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Abstract

*‘Actually it was really good, better than expected.’
(Anonymous participant in a families’ orientation session)*

In 2010 two disparate groups of University of Newcastle staff noticed a gap in the transition to university for commencing students. While there was a range of activities designed to assist new students on campus, the gap for some was in familial understanding and expectations of higher education. Sometimes education was not even viewed as a viable option compared to employment.

Most commencing students are in the under thirty demographic and they have the most involved parents of any generation. Here was the paradox: how to find a way for these families to feel connected but not attached and to have them support the idea of higher education. As a starting point we chose a family orientation session and a z-card information calendar and, based on positive feedback, there are plans to institutionalise these initiatives.

Background

The University of Newcastle attracts a high proportion of students from rural and low socioeconomic backgrounds and, according to a 2009 internal report, fifty per cent of these students are the first in their family to undertake university study. The combination of first in family and low socioeconomic factors means the journey towards a successful transition to university for many commencing students finds them in direct conflict with the belief systems of their parents or siblings. These students may face:

- financial pressures to favour employment over study;
- lower levels of parental support, both intellectually and emotionally; and
- normative social pressures to follow in their parents’ or siblings’ footsteps.

Parents, siblings and partners can play an important role in buffering students from the effects of these pressures. The nurturing support provided by a parent has been recognised as an important predictor of academic success. Munro (1981), for example, found that parental factors, such as a parent’s educational aspirations for their children, have been shown to have a powerful influence on the educational goals of students. In a recent study of students’ approach to evaluating information sixty-one per cent of respondents reportedly turned to friends and/or family members when they needed help and advice. Kift and Field (2008) argue that student engagement, or otherwise, is a product of the relationship between academic and external factors. A positive academic experience complemented by a positive external environment results in improved student engagement. The Bradley Report (2008) endorses ‘initiatives to improve awareness must involve working with parents and student

influencers, and communicating the benefits of higher education through various outreach programs.’

Several programs have been established at the University of Newcastle to provide additional support to improve retention through a combination of integrated and add-on initiatives. While these initiatives provide students with support while on-campus they have failed to take into account off-campus factors, such as the support that arises from the parent or guardian’s involvement and understanding of a student’s academic experience. Faculty staff also reported the well known phenomenon that the majority of enquiries were from parents. In some cases parents were acting as the voice of students or were contacting university staff without the student’s permission or knowledge and were disappointed or angry when information could not be disclosed.

Two groups of staff separately applied for a competitive internal equity grant to address this perceived gap. The University Equity Initiatives Grants support equity initiatives proposed by individuals or groups across the University which aim to enhance staff and student equity and diversity. The overlap in the two submissions resulted in a partnership team comprised of academic and professional staff from the Faculty of Engineering and Built Environment, the Centre for Teaching and Learning, and the Equity and Diversity Unit.

The aim of the project was to increase the supportive capacity in students’ at-home learning environments by educating their primary support people about the expectations and demands of undertaking university study. To achieve this goal the project team proposed to develop a z-card informative pocket calendar and an orientation session designed to enhance the effectiveness of external support for students who are first-in-family and/or from low socio-economic status backgrounds.

Planning and production

The project was undertaken in five phases: literature review; student and staff focus groups; z-card and orientation session development; and evaluation. Selected parts are described below.

Student and Staff Focus Groups

To ensure the orientation session and z-card informative pocket calendar addressed the needs of parents of commencing students the project team conducted a series of focus groups with current first year ‘first in family’ students. The key themes to emerge from these discussions were attitude; financial concerns and awareness of higher education.

Negative attitude towards university and tertiary education: was the strongest theme to emerge from the discussions with students. Students reported that they felt their parents saw little value in a tertiary qualification. Instead, students reported feeling pressure from parents to immediately seek employment after completing their Higher School Certificate. In the most extreme cases several students reported that their parents actively discouraged them from attaining a tertiary qualification. After exploring this further, students reported that they felt the family attitude towards university was influenced by perceptions of stereotypes of lazy students; universities as elite institutions and not for “people like us”; and fear of academia.

Financial concerns: The cost of completing a university degree appeared consistently in the feedback from students. Students believed that their parents were not only apprehensive about the debt burden of a university degree but the additional day to day cost of text books. Whilst students felt that the costs were not as bad as their parents expected, they did indicate that their parents wanted forewarning in order to be able to plan.

Understanding of what is involved in university study: finally and perhaps most important in the context of this project, students reported that their parents knew little about what was involved in being a successful university student. Students felt that parents did not understand the challenge of managing competing demands and the impact of this on student stress levels. This was exacerbated by a lack of understanding of university terminology.

Based on feedback from students, professional and academic staff the project team developed an orientation session for families which was piloted in the Faculty of Engineering and Built Environment and a z-card pocket 2011 calendar which was distributed to all commencing students.

Z-card

The z-card was designed to complement the information provided to families in the orientation session and to provide parents with tips about how those who engage with students can best support them to succeed in their studies.

The team intended the z-card to be used by parents as a functional calendar. It included information about:

- key semester milestones and pressure points;
- reasons for going to university;
- financial costs;
- differences between uni and school;
- university jargon;
- key predictors of academic success; and
- free support services for students.

Families' orientation session

Invitations to the orientation session were mailed with students' enrolment packages. The orientation session was piloted with a cohort of students in the Faculty of Engineering and Built Environment. The session was scheduled to coincide with the Faculty's student enrolment day. It was hoped that this would increase the attendance as parents, guardians and partners could attend while the enrolled student was involved in other activities. A number of speakers described the emotional journey and explained campus safety and security, privacy, and what to expect in the first semester. The z-card calendars were distributed at the session, along with a combination of other informative and promotional materials.

Expected impact on the student experience

The student experience can be enhanced if families feel confident about providing useful information and advice and is further enhanced if the families have had a positive experience with the university.

Evaluation of initiatives

The evaluation consisted of a post orientation session survey and a follow up interview with parents four weeks after the commencement of semester. The specific aims of the evaluation were to answer the following three overarching questions.

1. To what extent has the project met its intended objectives?
2. What was the most effective component of the project?
3. How can these initiatives be improved, for example in design or implementation?

Post Orientation Session Feedback

A total of 43 parents attended the orientation session. The majority of these parents (63%) indicated their commencing student was not first in family to attend university. The remainder were parents of a first in family student.

Parents were asked to rate the extent to which the session had

- increased their understanding of what is required to be a successful student,
- increased their confidence in their ability to provide support,
- been relevant.

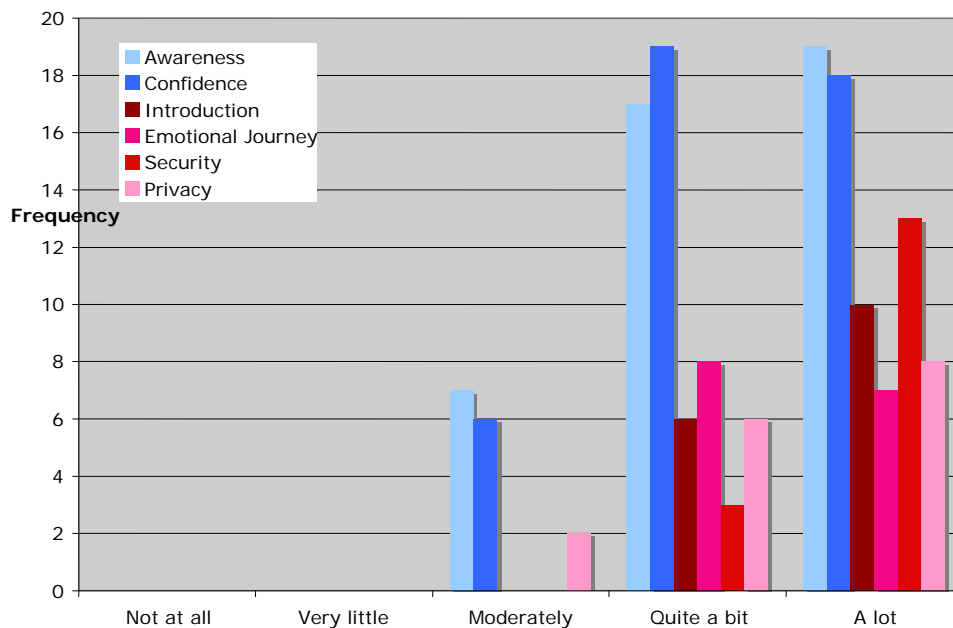
As illustrated below, feedback from parents was overwhelmingly positive.

At the time of print evaluative data on the z-card was not available.

Early evaluation has led to the project team working on a number of recommendations to institutionalise the initiatives. Current actions include:

1. A review of z-card content, based on the evaluations received. Continuing to provide the z-card or similar calendar style document to commencing undergraduate and enabling program students.
2. Roll out of family sessions across the University.
3. Consideration of offering a family session at night or on a weekend.
5. Creation of a highly visible family and friends website which includes FAQs and a glossary of terms.
6. Provision of an air conditioned visitors' room for the entire enrolment and orientation period. Having tea and coffee making facilities available and student mentors or casual staff available to answer questions.

Figure 1: Post orientation session feedback (N=43)



Questions for the audience

1. Over the past thirty years parents have been more involved in their children's lives than ever before and this trend looks as though it will continue into the foreseeable future. Are other universities actively engaging this highly influential FYE group?

2. Many universities have parents' web pages and parent information sessions at their open days. Which universities offer parents' sessions during orientation and how are they received?

Session Plan

1. Presenters: Introduction to project – Why we saw the need for the project. (5 minutes)
2. Presenters: Overview of the project – z-card and orientation session (5 minutes)
3. Presenters: What we learnt and future plans (5 minutes)
4. Presenters and whole group discussion: centred around the questions for the audience (15 minutes)

References

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