

Connect for Success: A proactive student identification and support program

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Abstract

Edith Cowan University (ECU) data reveals that one third of students who commence their studies do not persist to graduation. Furthermore, 60% of these students leave in their first year and more than 30% leave before the end of Semester 1. Connect for Success (C4S) is a proactive student retention program that systematically identifies and supports students who are likely to require assistance to complete their studies. C4S aims to improve the success of students at ECU and subsequently retention and graduation rates. This nuts and bolts paper provides an overview of how C4S was established at ECU in Semester 1, 2012 and how the program will be progressively rolled-out from 2012-2014.

Introduction

Connect for Success (C4S) is a proactive student retention program that systematically identifies and offers support to students who may require assistance to complete their studies. C4S aims to improve the success of students at Edith Cowan University (ECU), and subsequently, retention and graduation rates. This nuts and bolts paper provides an overview of how C4S was implemented at ECU in Semester 1, 2012 and how the program will be progressively rolled-out from 2012-2014.

Estimates of university course completion in Australia vary between 70 and 85 per cent (Marks, 2007). ECU data reveals that one third of students who commence their studies at ECU do not persist to graduation. Furthermore, 60% of these students leave in their first year with more than 30% leaving before the end of Semester 1. Unfortunately this statistic is not unique to ECU; it is widely documented nationally and internationally that those who do not complete tertiary qualifications often leave within the first 12 months of study (Beck & Davidson, 2001; Harrison, 2006; Singell & Waddell, 2010; Tinto, 1993).

Similarly, the cost of student attrition is equally well reported (Fusch, 2011). Institutions incur both direct and indirect costs when students do not persist to graduation. Costs not only include lost tuition income, but also losses from investments made in student recruitment, support, staff time and administrative resources (Fusch, 2011; Seidman, 2005). Not surprisingly, it has been found that in comparison the costs associated with first year success and retention activities are small compared to the increased revenue generated from EFTSL retained students (Marrington, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010).

Ohio State University, Open University (UK) and Queensland University of Technology have published data demonstrating the financial benefits of university-wide student support initiatives (Marrington, et al., 2010; Simpson, 2005). Ohio State University reported a return of investment of 650% (equating to US\$1.9m) and Open University (UK) a return of investment of 450% (£1.2m) on their university wide initiatives. Queensland University of Technology reported the generation of an additional AU\$3.3m in student fees in one year

from a project which cost approximately AU\$400,000 to develop and staff (ROI of 725%; Nelson, Quinn, Marrington, & Clarke).

Development of Connect for Success

ECU is committed to breaking down barriers to education and is considered a leader in the development of alternative entry pathways to higher education. Given this, ECU's student population is diverse and largely composed from non-traditional backgrounds. Consequently, it was essential ECU embarked on developing a university-wide retention initiative that focused on supporting students.

A comprehensive review of best-practice, evidence-based initiatives was conducted to inform the program's design and scope. The review found that effective retention strategies are typically proactive in supporting students rather than reactive; institutions which initiate active individual contact with students (rather than provide services which require students to self refer) retain more students than institutions that do not (Simpson, 2005). Paradoxically, it is often the students who require support that do not seek it (Fusch, 2011; Kinnear, Boyce, Sparrow, Middleton, & Cullity, 2008).

Despite this evidence it appears only a few higher education institutions in Australia and New Zealand have documented the establishment of comprehensive proactive retention programs university-wide. A review of the Australian tertiary student experience found little evidence of the use of systems/technology which enable and support the implementation of retention policies and processes (like automatic early alert systems). Only one university and two private higher education providers canvassed had systems which provided a central repository of case information, interactions and documentation for individual cases and cohorts of students who required support (Adams, Banks, Davis, & Dickson, 2010).

Only three universities in Australia and New Zealand (University of New England, Queensland University of Technology and Auckland University of Technology) appear to have published evidence of proactive student support initiatives (Carlson & Holland, 2009; Head, 2010; Marrington, et al., 2010; Nelson, Duncan, & Clarke, 2009). These programs consist of systems whereby institutional student data is collated and then analysed to establish which students may require support. Programs differ in how this is achieved but the premises of the initiatives are similar across the institutions. Once students have been identified, contact is made by the university with the student. Each of these interventions have been found to increase student retention and success and are considered financially beneficial (Marrington, et al., 2010).

These programs formed the basis for which Connect for Success was developed. A proposal for funding was submitted to the Vice-Chancellors planning group which outlined how a proactive early alert system would work within the existing structures at ECU. The proposal was approved for funding in September of 2011.

C4S has two key components. Firstly, a system which automatically flags students who are deemed likely to require support needed to be established. Secondly the project needed to design and implement processes/mechanisms to make contact and case-manage students flagged in need of support.

Flagging students who require support

Although research has found predictors of student attrition are largely similar across institutions (i.e., grades, university entrance score, language skills; Marks, 2007; McMillan, 2005; Seidman, 2005) students remain or leave university for a wide range of interacting and complex reasons. No single variable accounts for all forms of student attrition. It was important ECU held institutional specific data which could accurately identify which students were most likely to require support.

Extensive work was conducted to identify which student variables were predictive of attrition at ECU. Data available in ECU's Enterprise Information Management (EIM) system was used to develop statistical models for the first three semesters of a student's lifecycle. Over 200 student variables were used in the analyses, including demographic and student progress data. Analyses were split into undergraduate and postgraduate courses resulting in a total of six predictive models of retention. Modelling has ensured that ECU has institution specific data for the likelihood (probability score) of each commencing and continuing student enrolled in an undergraduate course.

Making contact with students

Although ECU has the capability to flag students proactively, there was no infrastructure currently in use to support students proactively identified (staff, automated systems, databases). A C4S Project Team was established to develop and guide the rollout of C4S across the University. The Project Team consisted of a Program Board (chaired by the DVC Academic, PVC Teaching and Learning, Executive Dean, Director of Student Services, CFO and CIO), Stream Leaders group (senior managers from key departments within ECU) and Program Manager.

The Project Team developed a program plan which will provide an overview of the deployment and progressive rollout of C4S at ECU from 2012-2014. The staggered rollout provides time for technical solutions and builds to automate the student identification and support process.

Work has been divided into five program management stages; Initiation, Establishment (Semester 1, 2012), Pilot (Semester 2, 2012), Deployment (2012-2013) and Continuous Improvement (2013-2014). The Initiation stage was largely concerned with establishing program governance, control mechanisms and program organisation. During this stage a Project Initiation Document, Program Plan, Communication Plan and Risk Management Plan were drafted and agreed upon by the Project Team.

The Establishment phase (Semester 1, 2012) saw the development of interim technical solutions which established proactive student contacts (using predictive modelling) to commence prior to the complete rollout of the program. During the establishment phase, a change management process was completed in consultation with HR to better support staff for the increase in student referrals and to establish newly funded positions. This phase was also responsible for initial process and workflow mapping and technical solutions design drafts to ensure automation of processes was possible in later stages of the program.

It is anticipated a full pilot will commence in Semester 2, 2012 involving use of the processes and technology solutions established in the previous stage and refinement through a review of program operations. This stage will also assess the inclusion of new data sources to improve the predictability of the modelling.

Similarly, while the Establishment and Pilot phases are rolled out, the Deployment stage will run concurrently. This stage will develop and deploy the agreed upon final technical solutions and business processes. It is expected that once Deployment has ceased, business processes and enhancements will continue (Continuous Improvement stage) and will be ongoing.

C4S on the ground

C4S is managed and operationalised by Student Connect Team located within the Student Services Centre. Connect Officers are a specialist student support role responsible for addressing and resolving complex individual student issues and enquiries by implementing a wide range of high level support strategies. These include, but are not limited to, one-on-one student consultations, support interventions, referral to services internal and external to ECU, and specialist Visa advice for international students.

As per processes at AUT, QUT and UNE, a list of students is generated (from modelling conducted in the EIM) which identifies those who may require support based on their student data. This report is triaged by two Team Leaders (process will be automated during the Deployment Stage) to ensure no student is contacted twice or too often. Personalised emails are then sent to the identified students offering assistance via the University enquiry management system. If students do not reply to the initial email, they are contacted by telephone with a similar message.

Once contact has been made with a Connect Officer, students choose to opt in for support/case-management. Action plans are drafted in collaboration with the case-managed student which records and outlines what support needs to be provided by the University. Action plans typically consist of referrals to other specialist support services and programs offered by ECU. Dependant on the needs of the student, students may be referred onto one or more of these services. The Connect Team work closely with academics, student information officers, learning advisors, counsellors, careers advisors, and others to ensure students are accessing the appropriate resources available.

The student is case-managed by the Connect Officer until the student decides they no longer require assistance.

Program performance

Regular evaluation of C4S is conducted to ensure the initiative is effectively supporting students and is financially viable. A number of Performance Indicators are used to assist with program evaluation. These include: percentage of students who opt in for case management (30% target); weighted average mark higher for students opting in for support compared to those who opt out; case managed students retention rate higher than that of the university rate; case managed students progress rate higher than that of the university rate; and improvement in Academic Progress Status for those formally identified as on 'Probation' or 'At Risk'.

Key Questions/Issues

1. Consider what challenges you might have establishing a similar project at your university.

2. What measures should be taken to ensure the intent and integrity of programs like these are maintained?
3. What can we do better to improve C4S?

Session Outline

Brief introduction of C4S at ECU (15 minutes).

Small group discussion considering the questions outlined above (5 minutes).

Whole group discussion addressing the critical issues identified in small group discussion drawing on audience members experiences (10 minutes).

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