



Early people-rich interventions improve transition and first year retention

The challenge

CQUniversity has, of the project institutions, the highest rate of students from low SES backgrounds. In addition, the most recently reported data from the Commonwealth Department of Education and Training shows that CQUniversity has close to the highest level of attrition compared to other Australian higher education institutions¹. Therefore, factors that contribute to high levels of attrition and strategies for supporting students transitioning into university to improve the retention and success of students, especially those of low socio-economic backgrounds located in regional areas, is a high priority for CQUniversity.

This case study investigated a pilot initiative aimed at addressing the continuing high levels of attrition of regional students at CQUniversity.

The study evaluated the impact of an intentional intervention program for first year commencing Bachelor of Nursing students. The initiative involved an initial phone call inviting commencing students to participate in a telephone interview, during which the inherent and program requirements were discussed, and any issues that might impact on their capacity to meet those requirements were identified.

to have somebody contact me and just see how I was going like I don't know if you realised that I hadn't been to uni before or realised that being an older student and being so far away, it was nice to have somebody contact me and see how I was going and if I was prepared and what my expectations were

Students who were identified as needing further guidance and support were connected to appropriate services.

A follow-up interview was conducted at the end of the teaching period, during which students were asked to reflect on their first term of study and provide feedback on how they coped, and any changes that needed to be addressed to ensure their success.

Six students who participated in both the pre-commencement interview and the follow-up interview were invited to contribute their experience of the initiative to the case study.

¹ Commonwealth of Australia. Department of Education. 2014 Appendix 4 – Attrition, success and retention. <https://docs.education.gov.au/node/38149>

Early people-rich interventions improve transition and first year retention

Six staff members who were actively involved with the six students in either teaching or student support roles participated in individual semi-structured interviews. The interviews explored the staff members' perceptions of the impact of the pre-enrolment interviews on the students' experiences.

Key findings

Analysis of the interview data revealed a number of common issues faced by students and showed that the intervention positively shaped their experiences. The two key issues identified by students were concerns about balancing responsibilities and the need to travel for on-campus learning experiences. Balancing responsibilities was a major recurring theme and included balancing paid- and unpaid-work/life/study balance, and time management concerns. Data indicated that students underestimated the workload involved but the pre-commencement interview supported them to make decisions appropriate for their individual circumstances.

The key observations from this case study are that students developed a sense of belonging or connected to the university from receiving a phone call and speaking with a staff member.

Students reported that the intervention was supportive, built their confidence and that they felt better prepared for their studies.

to have somebody contact me and just see how I was going like I don't know if you realised that I hadn't been to uni before or realised that being an older student and being so far away, it was nice to have somebody contact me and see how I was going and if I was prepared and what my expectations were

(Student)

Early intervention shapes the 21st Century student experience

This case study highlights the importance of implementing initiatives that encourage a sense of belonging, and of ensuring that students have the opportunity to build confidence and are motivated and supported by a whole of university approach. It emphasises that students' emotional well-being is not only an individual concern but should be of interest to the university.

The study found that when staff have greater understanding of individual student needs, a more equitable approach to accommodating the diversity of student needs is possible.

The good practice highlighted by this case study is the benefit of engaging students early in their student journey, and the importance of a personalised approach to communicating the requirements of students' programs and supporting them in identifying strategies to assist them in meeting those requirements.

Implications for practice

This case study demonstrates the potential benefits of an institution-wide implementation of a pre-commencement interview strategy for all commencing first year students, to promote a sense of belonging, provide students with an opportunity to develop confidence early in their enrolment by understanding the requirements of their program, and connect students to the services they may require so that any potential barriers to their success are dealt with in a timely way.

Conclusion

The findings of this case study resonate with Kahu's framework and highlight the importance of understanding the sociocultural influences on students. Recurring issues identified in the pre-commencement interviews included personal concerns, time management issues for working students trying to balance workload with study commitments, and family commitments and challenges experienced by mature-aged students.

The pre-commencement interviews helped those students negotiate more achievable course commitments, with some students deferring studies and others reducing their study load for the term. Student feedback from those who participated in both phases of the project indicated that they were better prepared and able to successfully progress through their studies as a result of the pre-commencement interviews. Students also noted the benefits of being made aware of processes at the outset of their studies, and they appreciated being made aware of the inherent and program requirements, as well as the supports the university could provide to assist them to achieve their goals.